
Seduction, Abandonment, and Sorcery in Middle English Lyrics

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Loue is a selkud wodenesse.¹

“**A**mor vincit omnia” (love conquers all) is a well-known expression that was recited passionately in medieval culture with voice, with pen, and, as John Cherry posits, even with tools, as it was often inscribed on medieval brooches (7). In medieval literature, this expression was coupled with the euphoric image of medieval courtly love. However, the concept of courtly love, so popular in medieval literature, is not the sole basis of the Middle English lyrics. In fact, many of the lyrics portray love in a very different way. The lyrics that are the focus of this article are not about courtly love; instead, they are concerned with a single woman’s feelings of rejection, anger, fear of unfaithfulness, and fear of pregnancy. The women in these lyrics are seduced and then abandoned. Oftentimes, they react to this abandonment by using magic. Magic becomes a tool with which women respond to the expectations society placed upon them.

My purpose in writing this article is to expose a different view of romantic relationships that exist in medieval literature,

1 Love is an extraordinary madness.

a view that is in opposition to courtly love. My intention is to encourage high school English teachers to incorporate these lyrics into a lesson plan because studying them is an imaginative, entertaining approach to get students interested in medieval culture. The relationship issues these characters wrestle with are present in relationships today. Students will be able to relate to those problems and, thus, find themselves relating to songs that were written hundreds of years ago. Young adults will be drawn to the irrational behavior of the characters; these individuals blame others for their own mistakes, and they consider blame to be a logical and acceptable means of managing a difficult situation. These characters and the situations they find themselves in are entertaining, and the magic, secrecy, infatuation, and jealousy these poems contain are all timeless plot devices that have captivated the human mind through the ages.

In the lyrics, magical power most often exists in the form of curses. The Middle English lyrics that contain references to curses are not necessarily about magic, and understanding that is imperative. Magic is not central to the plots of these lyrics; the focus is the psychological state of the woman, and magic simply serves as an indicator of that state. Instead, the focus is on an inward state of mind, which is just as mysterious as any magic.

Single lower-class females in England during the Middle Ages were expected to fill two contrasting roles simultaneously: that of the sensual, uninhibited woman, and that of the demure, virginal maiden. The importance of virginity in medieval culture is strongly linked to the Virgin Mary, who was the focal point of Christianity. As a result, medieval people glorified womanhood to an extent that had not been witnessed before. In contrast, society also placed heavy emphasis on the sensuality of a single female. A single woman could not simultaneously be a virginal representation of Mary and be a sensual, uninhibited woman. The futile attempt to fill both of these roles had a negative effect on the psyche of single women, and consequently affected their romantic relationships. Out of frustration, they reacted with the use of magic.

A defining factor when constructing the framework of a

single medieval female's sexuality is not what happens before or during the sex, but what happens after the sex; specifically the way in which she reacts to her lover's abandonment after the affair. I intend to examine these lyrics with the purpose of exposing a component previously unstudied in any substantial depth: the belief in and use of magic as a way of reacting to abandonment by a lover. This aspect of sexuality is demonstrated by the female characters in the Middle English lyrics.

It is interesting to study how these women dealt with the anger they felt after abandonment. Since human existence, romantic relationships have involved the natural emotions of passion as well as anger. Both of these emotions cross all cultures, all classes, and all centuries. But how medieval females dealt with these emotions is fascinating because they are connected to magic, and some of the Middle English lyrics illustrate this. I will explain how male seducers relied on magic to induce passion in the women they desired, and how women relied on magic to punish their ex-lovers after abandonment or to explain behaviors.

Turning to a belief in magic as a way to deal with being abandoned exposes a fabulous imagination that is fueled by cultural beliefs. A solid conviction in the existence of magic is the lens through which these women viewed their world, including how they judged the actions of others and of themselves. This may seem to be an extreme, almost surreal worldview, but how they arrived at such a point is easy to understand. One simply has to recall what society expected of them: they were expected to be sensual virgins, an oxymoron at best, and yet they met that expectation not only with willingness but with fervor. Upon consenting to an affair, they expected to receive something in return, whether financial gain, fulfillment of their own desire, or reciprocated love, and those expectations were realized. The women in these lyrics did indeed receive money, sexual fulfillment, or love, so these situations would appear to be the perfect relationships. But these ideal relationships proved only temporary, as these lyrics also reveal that the women's expectations were met for only a brief amount of time. In each lyric that I discuss, the

woman consents to an affair, soon finds herself abandoned, and then resorts to magic either as a tool for seeking revenge or as an explanation for her lover's behavior or for her own. That they turned to the use of sorcery as a means of punishment for the men who abandoned them exposes an impious, vengeful side to the medieval single female. The lyrics illustrate that their arrival at this state was due to the actions of the men who abandoned them.

The lyric "*Now springes the spray*" is narrated by a male who, while passing through unfamiliar woods, can hear a woman singing. Although the sound of her voice is beautiful, the words she is uttering are not. She is singing a curse: "the clot him clinge! / Wai is him i' louve-longinge / Shall libben aye"² (8-10). Curiosity peaked, the man follows the sound of her voice and finds the maiden "under a bogh" (14). He immediately asks her why she is singing, and in anger she retorts: "My lemman me haves bihot;³ / He changes anew" (20-22). This abandoned maiden is clearly enraged. Though the image that the narrator supplies is pastoral -- I fonde hire in an herber swot -- her state of mind is described in direct opposition to the setting. Her mind is racing, reeling, plotting how to punish her lover for abandoning her: "If I may, it shall him rewe⁴ / By this day" (23-24). With bitterness and rage, she is reacting to the abandonment by seeking revenge.

Surely phrases similar to "if it is in my power he will regret it" have been uttered by abandoned single women since human existence, so this woman's immediate response is not surprising. What is surprising, though, is that she would think of curses as a justifiable way to react to the situation. It is by no stretch of the imagination certain that this medieval single female had sorcery in mind as a distinctive way to react. This conclusion is reached because she first sings a curse, and knowing

2 May the earth cling to him! / Woe to him who I loved / shall exist forever.

3 My lover promised me true love;

4 If it is in my power, he will regret it.

this culture's belief in and use of magic, it can be safely assumed that it is indeed sorcery to which she is referring.

John Riddle confirms that medieval women relied on spells and curses to punish men. He writes in *Eve's Herbs* that in 1484 a treatise was documented that explored the question of why women were prone to producing magic. Riddle explains that it was concluded that women were "more inclined to superstition, and more fragile than men;" thus they were prone to believing in magic and to attempts to use magic. This treatise includes a list of things women were capable of doing with magic, and the list included "obstructing the generative act by rendering men impotent" (111). Interestingly, all of the capabilities listed in this treatise are somehow linked to sexuality, and this one in particular could be used as revenge against an ex-lover. In reality, putting a curse on a man was conceivable; therefore, accepting the idea that the woman in this lyric could be plotting a serious vengeful act is historically plausible.

It is important to study her choice of words carefully. She will punish him 'if' it is in her power. She is going to make a sincere attempt to punish him, but the word 'if' denotes that she may or may not have the power to do so. Her word choice insinuates that she may have never sought revenge through cursing before, but she knows the possibility exists. This lyric is not about the "may the earth cling to him" curse of her threat that he will regret abandoning her. It is about her desire to have the power to create magic in order to seek revenge. The lyric is about her state of mind and how she handles the situation.

Similar to "*Now springes the spray*," the lyric "In a frith as I con fare fremede" also has a male narrator who reiterates a conversation he had with a maiden. He recalls how, as he approached her, he was taken aback by her natural beauty. She glistens like gold, and he considers her a prize to be won; he is on a quest for her body. As I will demonstrate, it seems that she has been propositioned before, as she is familiar with the game and how to say no. Upon seeing him leer at her, the maiden immediately instructs him to go away, as the narrator explains:

“Heo me bed go my gates lest hire gremede;”⁵ and she gives him a specific reason why he needs to leave: “No kepte heo non hen- ing here”⁶ (7-8). This statement, though short, says a great deal about her character; she is confident and is unafraid to speak her mind, even in front of a male stranger. The seducer is not deterred, however, and the two begin a banter in which he makes promises to her that she in turn rejects. He seems to be under the impression that she is a whore who will not hesitate to have sex in exchange for gifts of clothing and protection from “cares and kelde”⁷ (11).

Determined to keep him at bay, she rejects his offer of new clothes. The seducer, determined as well, takes a different approach, now promising faithfulness until he grows gray. Because she rejects his offer of clothing, the promise of a lifetime of faithfulness may induce in her a feeling of love for him, and this is his last option of the three. But she does not believe he would be faithful: “sone thou woldest vachen an newe”⁸ (31). She launches into the plausible scenario of becoming a mother who is unable to feed her child, and then, much to her horror, “in uch an hyrd ben hated and forhaght”⁹ (34) for being a whore, thereby ostracized by her family. She then prophesies that she would have to beg him to remain faithful to her because she would have no other choice but to stay with him. A mother and shunned by society, she would have no other options. She refuses to put herself in the position where she would have to beg a man for anything, and this is not surprising, as her strong, independent personality was established earlier on in the lyric when she did not hesitate in telling him to get away from her because she did not want to hear any insulting suggestions.

After she reiterates that she will not give in “thagh I swore by treuthe and othe”¹⁰ (43), she makes it apparent that

5 She commanded me to go away, lest she become angry.

6 She did not wish to hear any insulting suggestions.

7 Cares and bitter sorrow.

8 Soon you would fetch a new lover.

9 In each household be hated and despised.

10 That I would not consent by truth and oath.

she longs to escape, but escape from exactly what is not clearly stated. I suggest that she wants to escape not only the situation of the moment, but

social constructs in general. She is well aware of their social differences, and knows that, because he is of a higher social class, he has power over her, regardless the strength of her willpower. As Kim Phillips illustrates, “the importance of consciousness of rank... has been paid little attention, which is perhaps surprising when one remembers that social status played as great a role or greater than biological sex in creating categories of licit and illicit sexualities in cultures obsessed with hierarchy” (156). There may be nothing she can do to resist his advances simply because of her social class.

Her seducer responds to her plausible scenario by stressing that, if she would only weigh her options, she would realize that it is better to have the nice clothes and the passion than to end up unhappily married: “Betere is taken a comeliche i’ clothe, / In armes to cusse and to cluppe, / then a wrecche iwedded so wrothe”¹¹ (37-39). He makes it sound as if these are her only two choices: be his mistress or to be married to someone she feels no passion for. He says that it is better in the end to choose new clothes and passion, because they are well worth the risk compared to the alternative.

The line immediately following the seducer and the maiden’s prophecies is “thagh he me slowe, ne might I him asluppe”¹² (40) and has a couple of possible meanings, as it is unclear who is speaking. Critics have argued about the meaning of this ambiguous section of the lyric. I suggest that the seducer is speaking as if he were the maiden, playing her part in their rhetorical game. He is not referring to a physical beating; rather, he is imagining the maiden’s realization that he has beaten her at the game, and she cannot escape his advances because of his social status. He has won the prize. The maiden, though, wants

11 It is better to take a person comely in clothes, / in arms to kiss and to embrace, / than a wretch wedded so badly.

12 That though he beat me, I might not escape him.

neither of these two options, and this is where her belief in magic becomes apparent. She opts for a third choice: to escape.

This maiden feels powerless on many levels. God had the power to shape her into a maiden; she is discontented with that. Her seducer has power over her simply because he is male, and society controls her because of the economic hierarchy that is in place. All of these forces have her feeling trapped. She longs to become something else, anything else, by shape-shifting in order to escape not only this situation but her maiden existence as well. On a first reading, her desire to shape-shift may link her to negative connotations because oftentimes shape-shifting is inaccurately associated with dark magic. Michael Bailey writes that shape-shifting is not an indication of demonic association but an ability that is learned. Shape-shifting is a cultural medieval certainty that elements of earth, air, fire, and water are the building blocks for everything that exists. The people of the Middle Ages believed that everything was composed of one or more of these elements, and that it was possible to make one thing into another by recombining them with the use of magic. This maiden is not looking for help from demons to escape her predicament; she simply wishes she had the knowledge to shape-shift, wishes that she was educated in that area of magical expertise.

The maiden reluctantly admits, though, that she cannot shape-shift: “Mid shupping ne mey it me ashunche;¹³ / Nes I never wicche ne wile”¹⁴ (45-46). Her desire to be a sorceress is similar to the situation in the previously analyzed “*Now springes the spray*” in which the female is not sure if she has magical powers in order to deal with the situation at hand. The woman in “*In a Frith*,” however, knows without a doubt she does not have the ability to shape-shift, but her desire to have the power to use magic says much about her psychological state. And that is what these two lyrics have in common. Both of these lyrics illustrate a woman who is completely alone, with no one to rely on for help but her own self, so she relies on her belief in magic to guide her

13 I cannot escape by shape-shifting;

14 I am not a witch or sorceress.

in coping with the situation at hand.

The lyric "*I have forsworne it whil I live*" features a female narrator who is confident in her ability to successfully put a curse on someone, and she uses that confidence in a threatening manner. She consented to an affair out of financial need, and is now pregnant: "I go with childe, well I wot" (19). She proclaims that "I schrew the fader that it gate, / withouten he finde it milke"¹⁵ (20-21). The word "withouten" translates to "unless" and is important because it implies that Sir John has not abandoned her yet, but she is assuming that he will. That assumption most assuredly stems from some past experience, either her own or one she has heard about from other women. She is well aware that a woman's sexuality is in many cases not her own. It becomes a fundamental aspect of masculine identity and honor for the male. Social hierarchy is again at the root of the abandonment. An affair that resulted in pregnancy had the potential to disrupt the family line of heirs, because it could result in illegitimate children who would create a rival claim to all land and property. Social hierarchy was embedded in the cultural outlook and needed no discussion between the two parties. Even during the affair, the woman in this lyric had to have known that a future with this man was out of the question. Affairs involving a man and a woman of different social classes did occur, but were kept secret by both for the sake of keeping a respectable reputation in the community.

She has the power to curse her lover, and this is obvious because she states in an active voice "I curse the father," but she will only do so if he does not provide for the baby. She is relying on her belief in magic as a tool for revenge. She is ready to curse him, and is merely waiting to see what Sir John, who is unaware of her plan, will do. One possible form of revenge that she may be scheming is to put a curse on him that will cause impotence. For example, Richard Kieckhefer explains in *Erotic Magic in Medieval Europe* that "if a knot is tied around the phallus of a wolf in the name of a man...(the wolf being presumably dead,

15 I curse the father that it engendered, / Unless he finds it milk.

and the phallus removed), that person will be incapable of copulation until the knot is untied” (43). A much easier curse, also known to be effective, was to boil forty ants in daffodil juice in the name of a man (43). What needs to be considered here is that it is not the process of creating the curse, tying a knot around a wolf’s phallus or boiling the ants, for example, that makes the curse work; it is the psychological effect. If Sir John believes in magic, and his abandoned lover gets word to him that she is boiling forty ants in daffodil juice in his name to make him impotent, the thought alone could make him unable to perform. Again, what is important is how the belief in magic affects the psychological state. Even if there is no such thing as an operational curse, this woman has the power to control her ex-lover’s love life because both the man and the woman believe that the curses work.

Desire for the power to use magic exposes a belief in the existence of magic, and the lyric “*A, dere God, what I am fayn*” depicts this certainty in a different way than the lyrics previously discussed. In this lyric, the woman relies on her belief in magic to explain her own behavior. The woman in this tale consented to an affair, and is now pregnant and alone. She consents out of sexual desire, made clear by her statement “Now will I not lete for no rage”¹⁶ (17). She is pledging a vow to herself to never again consent to an affair out of desire. She does acknowledge her consent, but does not acknowledge her own responsibility in her willingness. She believes that the consent was out of her control, that an external force created in her the desire for sex. That external force, she believes, is magic used by the seducer: “I trow he coud of gramery; / I shall now telle a goodo skill why: / for what I hade siccurly, / To warne his will had I no mayn”¹⁷ (7-10). This says a great deal about her psychological state; she genuinely believes she is a passive victim. She uses the existence of the power of magic as the reason for her mistake, mak-

16 Now will I not allow for sexual passion.

17 I believe he knew magic; / I shall now tell the reason why: /
Because, from my own experience, / To refuse his will I had no strength.

ing an excuse, and yet a justifiable one. The maiden in this lyric was certainly aware that this happened, and so she lets herself believe that magic is how her lover was able to seduce her.

When the language in "*A, dere God, what I am fayn,*" is considered closely, specific words should be given important consideration. The woman's phrase "Of all his will I him lete" (12) translates to "I permitted him all of his will." The word "permitted" is a sign that she actually had control over the situation and could have refused his sexual advances, but instead she allowed him to have intercourse with her. This is an interesting contradiction to her other claim that she surrendered to his will because he had cast a spell on her. Either he was controlling her mind and her body with the use of a spell, or she had her faculties about her and was a willing participant. The language she uses suggests both possibilities, and thereby insinuates that she herself is unsure of what to believe.

The woman's use of the word "trowe" is interesting as well because it translates to "believe." It denotes that she believes he used magic to successfully seduce her, but she has no proof. In this sense, her belief in magic is indeed a sign of her psychological state. The possible use of magic is not the focus of this plot; rather, her belief in the possibility of magic as the cause is the focus in this lyric. This lyric is not about magic; it is about how her belief in magic affects her mental state.

In Middle English literature, women are often grouped into one of these three classifications: single virgin, married woman, and widow. What about the sexually active single woman? Did she exist? Certainly she did, and not just as a prostitute working in a brothel. These lyrics illustrate the sexually active single woman in a disheartening way because she is seduced and then abandoned. Each lyric in this article illustrates the single woman's belief in magic and how she relied on that belief to help explain the world in which she lived, to help find justice, and to help her make sense of her own behavior and the behavior of others, all amidst feelings of disorder and abandonment. A belief in magic gave her a sense of order and, more importantly, a sense of power.

These lyrics contain virtually every element that pertains to secretive romantic relationships: desire, euphoria, infatuation, jealousy, and fear: fear of others learning about the affair, fear of pregnancy, fear of the partner wanting commitment, and, above all, the woman's fear of abandonment. But the lyrics are more than just tales about romantic relationships; they provide information about the single medieval woman's belief in and use of magic. In this sense, the lyrics offer evidence regarding both when and how women employed magic, exemplifying that love is indeed an extraordinary madness.

It is important to remember that the Middle English lyrics were performed as songs, and that something is missing by reading them as poetry but not listening to them set to a melody. I suggest teaching these lyrics side-by-side with music that high school students listen to today, because introducing the students to these older texts through modern interpretation will make the lyrics more accessible. If the students bring in musical lyrics they are familiar with that address rejection, anger, passion, or revenge, and then compare the lyrics to the Middle English lyrics, they will find many similarities that span hundreds of years. A study of the Middle English lyrics allow students to reflect on their own life experiences, just as popular music does. To engage the students in identifying and interpreting the issues that are present in the Middle English lyrics, they could also be given an assignment to write and rap their own versions of the lyrics. After this project, the students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of how these lyrics reflect some of the attitudes and issues of the Middle Ages.

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Appendix

First line of poem	Original manuscript	Estimated date
<i>A, dere God, what I am fayn</i>	St. John's Camb. 259	Mid 15th c.
<i>I have forsworne it whil I live</i>	Camb. Univ. Ff. 5.48	15th c.
<i>In a frith as I con fare fremede</i>	B.M. Harley 2253	Early 14th c.
<i>Now springes the spray</i>	Lincoln's Inn, Hale 135	13th c.