Spring 5-15-2015

A Song of Rape and Infanticide: "Sir John Doth Play"

Candace Crawford
University of New Orleans, candace765@msn.com

A Song of Rape and Infanticide: “Sir John Doth Play”

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
British Literature

By

Candace Crawford

B.A. Newcomb College of Tulane University, 1978
M.A. Tulane University Graduate School, 1985
J.D. Tulane Law School, 1989

May 2015

Table of Contents

Abstract

The Middle English lyric, “Sir John Doth Play,” narrated in the female voice clearly depicts rape by a male authority figure and the narrator’s distress over her unplanned pregnancy, yet has been repeatedly interpreted and introduced by critics as a love song portraying the interaction of a seductive village priest and a gullible maiden. As such, the lyric provides a unique perspective on the patriarchal nature of the twentieth century and the value of critically re-examining literature rather than canonizing accepted interpretations of literary work.

British Literature, Middle English, Medieval Lyric, Medieval Law, Rape, Feminist Theory, Woman’s Song,

Introduction

"Sir John Doth Play" is a startling Middle English lyric, a narrative of rape and the anguish of unplanned motherhood. The lyric, evocative of a modern day country "he-done-her-wrong" song, resonates with recent political discussions of "legitimate rape" and the struggle on college campuses to define (and regulate) sexual assault. Nonetheless, although provocative and rare (relatively few secular Middle English lyrics survive), the lyric has been generally ignored. Although "Sir John Doth Play" may not merit inclusion in the Middle English literary canon alongside Chaucer and the Pearl Poet, it is one of only eighteen surviving Middle English lyrics with a female narrator (Plummer 151-152). This factor, along with its unusual subject matter, makes it an intriguing object of study. Additionally, because the lyric has evinced so little academic notice, reviewing most, if not all, published references and comments is possible. Almost a century's worth of published academic perceptions of and reactions to a single literary work affords a unique perspective on the patriarchal nature of the twentieth century. The consistent misogynistic deafness embedded in the scholarship pertaining to "Sir John Doth Play" reinforces the value of critically re-examining literature rather than canonizing an accepted interpretation of a literary work.

This paper is organized into five parts: an introduction to individual stanzas, pointing out actions of particular interest; an examination of pertinent words and concepts within historical and literary context, attempting to ascertain whether the plausibility of plain import of the narrator's words; a review of published introductory remarks, references, and criticism interpreting the lyric; a general overview of the lyric's context; and, finally, a comparison to the five existing Middle English lyrics most analogous to "Sir John Doth Play."

I.

Title

The lyric, in its original manuscript form, is untitled. Rather, the burden or refrain appears as the first line of the lyric and that line − "The last time I the well-ey woke" − was used as the lyric title in a recently published (1995) anthology edited by Thomas Gibson Duncan, Late Medieval English Lyrics and Carols 1400-1530 (143). That title is not standard. Rather, the lyric has been editorially assigned a range of titles beginning with "No. 456" in a 1935 compilation, The Early English Carols, edited by Richard Leighton Greene (278). In 1943, Carleton Brown and Russell Hope Robbins designated it as "Index No. 3409" in their Index of Middle English Verse (XX). The lyric appears again in Robbins' Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries in 1952, but this time Robbins designates it as "No. 25" with the title "A Betrayed Maiden's Lament" (19-20). More recently (and most notably in light of the lyric's subject matter), Thomas J. Garbaty entitles the lyric "Sir John Doth Play" in his anthology Medieval English Literature, first published in 1984 but reprinted and still used for college literature courses. Although this title was not created until 1984, I will use it throughout this thesis.

The Burden

Although generally presented as the first line in modern publications, the burden (or refrain) was designed to be repeated between each stanza in a live performance of the song and through its repetition presents the memorable theme of the lyric. In this case, the narrator reveals her resolve not to participate in the ancient well-waking ritual in the future:

I haue for-sworne hit whil I life to wake the well-ey

While the exact origin or meaning of "waking the well" is unclear, it is generally conceded that it was related to a pre-Christian/druid ritual, one not necessarily related to fertility

(Hope 1-11). Notably, burdens generally appear as two lines but this burden is written as one line in the manuscript (Robbins 19).

First Stanza

In the first stanza, the narrator establishes the basis for her decision to forego the well-waking ritual, introducing Sir John as the source of her troubles:

The last tyme I the wel wok,
Ser Iohn caght me with a croke;
He made me to swere be bell and boke
I shuld not tell-ey

"Sir" was sometimes used as an honorary term in addressing priests but, as exemplified in the medieval tales of Sir Gawain and Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale," it generally indicated a knight. Sir John appears to be a personage of some authority, an assumption reinforced by actions that resonate of traditional authority based on gender, class, and privilege. By forcing the narrator to swear an oath of secrecy on a Christian Bible, Sir John not only juxtaposes pagan and Christian rituals (well-waking and swearing on a Christian bible), but seeks to use the power of religious authority to cloak his abuse of power. The consistent (though in my opinion, mistaken) critical assumption is that Sir John is a village priest.

Second Stanza

The second stanza startlingly depicts rape:

ȝet he did me a wel wors turne:
He leyde my hed agayn the burne—

He gafe my mayden-hed a spurne,

And rofe my Kelly-ey

In relating that Sir John "*gafe my mayden-hed a spurne,/And rofe my Kelly-ey"* the narrator reveals she was a virgin and that, in breaking her maidenhead, Sir John took her treasure ("*Kelly-ey"*), that is, her virginity. Thus, the virgin maiden (in all likelihood a young girl) was caught by Sir John with an object of some sort (probably a staff) and done a "worse turn," when he laid her next to the stream or brook and took her virginity. These actions clearly indicate that she did not willingly participate in the initial sexual encounter.

Third Stanza

In the third stanza, the narrator relates that subsequent consensual relations with Sir John took place in her home:

Sir Iohn came to oure hows to play,

Fro euensong tyme til light of the day.

We made as mery as flowres in May-

I was begyled-ay

The narrator's reference to "our house" is intriguing as it suggests either the narrator's family home, indicating that her father consented to the relationship (as young girls did not ordinarily live on their own) or to one shared with Sir John, indicating that she became his concubine. In either event, Sir John was most likely a personage of some authority whom the father feared opposing rather than a village priest openly betraying his vows of chastity with a young girl.

Fourth Stanza

In the fourth stanza, the narrator reveals the predictable outcome of her relations with Sir John, as well as his enthusiastic reception pertaining to the prospective child:

Sir Iohn he came to our hows.

He made hit wondur copious;

He seyd that I was gracious-

To beyre a childe-ey!

Sir John's response to the news of prospective fatherhood does not suggest he intended to deny paternity or future support to the child, although a village priest would almost certainly deny both. His presentation of numerous gifts suggests neither concern about future costs nor repercussions to himself arising from a child born out of wedlock. Sir John is clearly a person of means and authority.

Fifth Stanza

By contrast, the fifth stanza indicates the narrator's stark unhappiness with the situation, cursing the father of her child and perhaps suggesting an intention to withhold sustenance from the infant:

I go with childe, wel I wo;

I schrew the fadur that hit gate

Withouten he fynde hit mylke and pap

A long while-ey.

Editorial glosses uniformly interpret "withouten he fynde hit mylke and pap" solely as a curse on Sir John *if* he withholds support (milk and food) for the child. However, "*he"* and *"hit"* could arguably refer to a male child rather than Sir John. Thus, an alternative interpretation

could be: I go with child, well I know/I curse the father that begat it (the child)/Without he (the child) find his milk and pap/A long while. If it is the male child who finds himself without food and sustenance, the narrator may be suggesting that infanticide manifests her curse upon "Sir John" and solves her situation.

Final line

The final line is enigmatic:

Bryan his my name iet

Most scholars dismiss the idea that this denotes the name of the creator of the lyric rather than the person who transcribed it in into the manuscript. Thus, the question remains as to whether this lyric – which is clearly narrated by a female – was, in fact, written by a female.

II.

Because the author is not identified, all interpretations are necessarily speculative. Nonetheless, two aspects of the lyric are notable from a modern perspective: First, the initial encounter was clearly a sexual assault and, second, the lyric is unusual in the maiden's active, rather than passive, reaction to her pregnancy. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the lyric in light of contemporary medieval social concepts and concerns.

Literary critics generally assume that "Sir John" was a priest or cleric based on both his title and the name John. Clerical seducers in medieval literature are often called John, Jack, or Jankyn, but "these names do not in turn necessarily indicate a clerk," as exemplified by Jankyn, the clever squire in Chaucer's Summoner's Tale who seduces no woman (Cartlidge 405, n. 26). Although some evidence indicates that medieval clerics may have been addressed by the title "Sir," it is a variant of the French *sire* which entered the English language in the fourteenth century as a title of honor applicable to a knight or baronet.

More telling, Sir John's actions reflect those of a feudal overlord rather than a village priest. Seigneurial rights *per se* may be, as Alain Boureau argues, a myth but the custom of high status males having their way with lower status females is age-old. As Boureau observed, "the dialectic of the master and the serving maid internalizes the limits of a slaveholding or patriarchal domination, bordering on genuine sexual abuses, that is not exclusive to any culture and has often been confused with the exercise of a *droit de cuissage*" (38). The "act of rape is an extreme expression of the power–relation between men and women" and its literary portrayal both contains and reflects wider societal attitudes to female sexuality and discourse (Catty 2). Even though clerics often appear as seducers in Middle English literature, there is nothing seductive about Sir John's action. Under the circumstances put forth in the lyric, it is difficult to accept "Sir John" as a cleric rather than a feudal personage of some power and distinction within his (and the narrator's) community.

Whether or not Sir John is a cleric, he clearly intimidates the narrator, making her swear to silence, an action indicative of a man of stature and authority in the community. The narrator's virginity before the encounter (as indicated by the tearing of her maidenhead) suggests that she is a young maiden. Similar to the modern concept of statutory rape, the "deflowering" of a "maid under 16 years of age" was punishable with imprisonment without bail or a large fine (Dalton 257). Sir John initiated the action by catching her with a *croke* which, although glossed variously as a staff, pottery, or shepherd's crook, was clearly used as a weapon. Sir John's insistence that the narrator swear on the "book," presumably a Bible, may indicate that he is a cleric, but the explicit depiction of sexual assault undermines the assumption that Sir John was a neighborhood priest.

Rape as the subject matter of a song is startling to the modern reader, but force in sexual encounters was "a fact of English life and literature," appearing in tales and ballads in the tradition of the French *pastorelle* and illustrated by the proverb "maids say nay and take it" (Garrett 38). Under medieval English law, however, a sexual assault constituted rape only if a woman "doth neither consent before or after" (Dalton 256). This concept of *post facto* consent (wherein consensual sex after the initial rape negates the rape) reinforced the idea that female consent may be assumed even when a woman denies it (Garrett 41). To the lyric's contemporary audience, the narrator's consensual relations with Sir John nullified the rape in the initial encounter. The popular assumption in the early modern period (late fifteenth to early sixteenth century) of English culture, as evidenced by the literature, was that "women want to be forced into sex" (Garrett 41). According to Cynthia E. Garrett, the notion that women say no when they mean yes was prevalent during the Middle Ages and after Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* was translated and published in English in 1590, the idea that women actually desired forcible rape became popular (40). Ovid maintains: "You may use force; women like you to use it; they often wish to give unwillingly what they like to give. She whom a sudden assault has taken by storm is pleased, and counts the audacity as a compliment" (59). Garrett avers that even *Ars Amatoria* was written as a mock didactic, Ovid's insistence that women found rape enjoyable transformed rape into consensual sex (40). The apparent acceptance of the actions depicted in "Sir John Doth Play" as suitable for a dance song suggests that, even before Ovid's text was translated into English, contemporary audiences were familiar with and accepted the ancient concept it espoused. In addition, the narrator's subsequent pregnancy invalidates any possibility of rape because medieval people believed that pregnancy was proof of female consent (Garrett 42). This traditional belief was asserted unequivocally in a legal handbook of the time, The Countrey

Justice: "If the woman at the time of the supposed rape, doe conceiue with child, by the ravishor, this is no rape, for a woman cannot conceiue with child, except she do consent" (Dalton 256). Therefore, the narrator's pregnancy was confirmation to a medieval audience that she consented to the initial sexual encounter.

Consistent with medieval concepts of subsequent consent and the impossibility of conception during rape, "Sir John Doth Play" has been categorized as a love song and Sir John's actions as seduction throughout the twentieth-century, although the underlying concepts have been long invalidated. Recurring verbal missteps of recent American political candidates (who distinguish "legitimate" rape) confirm that medieval concepts of love and rape have not disappeared despite evolving modern legal standards.

The narrator's reference to the later encounter in "*our hows"* is open to several explanations. In the early Middle Ages, rape was considered a property crime against father or husband (Wall 3). Because the narrator was a virgin before her encounter with Sir John, "our house" likely meant the family home, thereby indicating the later consensual encounter took place at the house of her father, the person whose property the narrator's rape would violate, and that Sir John was, in fact, a feudal overlord whose actions the father could not obstruct. Alternatively, "our" may also indicate that the house in question was that of Sir John and the narrator, signifying that the narrator had become Sir John's concubine – a theory that also supports the notion that Sir John was a man of wealth and authority in the neighborhood, as does the reference to the "copious" gifts he brought in response to the news of the pregnancy.

In addition, the maiden's later insistence that she was "begyled-ay," a word meaning "tricked" or "bewitched" and etymologically related to the use of guile and the pre-Christian practice of Wicca, as well as her curse upon Sir John and the child he begot, may indicate that

the lyric was written, or at least preserved, to discourage a pre-Christian ritual which the Church sought to ban. Cursing has been trivialized in modern times, but was taken quite seriously in the Middle Ages and, therefore, this lyric served as a harsh warning to those who participated in the pre-Christian ritual of waking the well. Curiously, in original manuscript, "we were" was crossed out before "begyled*"* (Robbins 19). This interesting variation may denote that Sir John and the narrator were equally at risk from their participation in a pagan ritual or, perhaps, that the maiden and her father were of the same mind about the narrator's continued relationship with Sir John. It is unclear, of course, whether variation the scribe (who copied the lyric into the manuscript) or the songwriter created the variation.

Sir John's apparent enthusiasm for the birth of his child may reflect the cultural change that occurred in this period with respect to the control of childbirth. Fiona Harris-Stoertz asserts that in the early Middle Ages women largely attended to and controlled childbirth but that an examination of French and English law codes written before 1325 reveals that males increasingly intervened into matters relating to childbirth and pregnancy (263-264). Harris-Stoertz observes that these early laws, opening the way for male control of pregnancy and childbirth, "helped pave the way for the greater loss of female hegemony in later centuries" (263). The recent political debates over who should make reproductive choices for a woman, a debate dominated by male politicians, perhaps reflects the truth of this observation. According to Harris-Stoertz, the increase in bureaucratic interest in childbirth was accompanied by a greater awareness and interest by men who, although rarely present in the birthing chamber, expressed their interest "with news and gifts penetrating the walls of the birthing chamber" (264). Thus, Sir John's interest in the child and gift-giving reflects this phenomenon. Moreover, in late medieval English communities, unmarried pregnant women could be subject to both secular fines and

ecclesiastical punishment, whereas the father, if known, was much less likely to be fined or punished (Bennett 193). The differing levels of parental enthusiasm may reflect this reality.

The final stanza is perhaps the most problematic of the lyric. It is generally translated as "I curse the father who begot it unless he finds it milk and food for a long while" (Duncan 143). However, "with-outen" may mean "unless," but it also means (and is generally glossed as such in other Middle English poems and lyrics) "without." Notably, in the manuscript, the scribe struck through "childe" before "fadur" of line 18 of the fifth stanza. (Robbins 20). This suggests that, as originally composed and passed down orally, the narrator in the song cursed the child within the context of withholding sustenance from it: "I curse the child that it [Sir John] begot/who will find himself without food and sustenance a long while." This, perhaps, explains the internal contradiction within the lyric that the interpretation of "withouten" as "unless" creates: the "copious" number of gifts brought to the narrator by Sir John in anticipation of the child does not suggest that he intends (or that the narrator thought he intended) to withhold support in the future. Moreover, in the age before baby formulas (*i.e.*, before the twentieth century), milk for babies was breast milk, either supplied by the mother or (for women of higher status) a wet-nurse; it would not fall to the father to find a baby milk, although a mother could easily withhold milk from the baby. The economic consequences of extra-marital pregnancy could be severe but, even when that was not an issue (as here where Sir John has provided "copius" gifts rather than abandoning mother and child), "communal ridicule and disapproval" were equally harsh deterrents that sometimes led to child murder by "selective neglect" (Butler 59- 60).

Sara M. Butler points out "The image of the nurturing and self-sacrificing mother is so deeply ingrained in Western society that child murders committed by a mother, throughout

history, have evoked horror and incredulity"[1] (60). But although the idea of infanticide is shocking to modern sensibilities, a different concept of kinship and mutual obligations existed in medieval culture such that the well-being of kindred did not necessarily require that every child survived (Cormack 202). As Nikki Stiller observes in a discussion of Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale," Griselda continuing loyalty to the man she believes killed her children "indicates a different set of priorities," specifically that "[a] woman's devotion to the well-being of her children appears . . . not to have been an absolute cultural value" (3). Stiller concludes that "it is not difficult to go a bit further to perceive that perhaps our concept of motherhood and the medieval concept of motherhood are not quite the same" (3).

The prevalence of infanticide in the Middle Ages is undetermined, but because economic factors are an issue in raising a child, more so in the case of a child of a single mother, it was perhaps more common than generally assumed. Evidence indicates that infanticide was frequent enough to be a punishable offense in medieval penitentials and law codes throughout Europe (Cormack 202). In some cases it was apparently even legal, as indicated by early Scandinavian law codes that accepted some forms of infanticide in the form of exposure of newborns rather than direct killing (Cormack 202). In any event, at a time when an infant's failure to thrive was not uncommon, it would be difficult to determine if the failure was purposeful. Child murder is the most easily concealed of homicides because it can be easily be disguised as an accidental death (Butler 63). Moreover, as Stephanie Chamberlain remarks, there developed in the early modern period a "generalized cultural anxiety about women's roles in the transmission of patrilineage" because mothers could so easily undermine patrilineal outcomes (73). In Butler's investigation of medieval infanticide, the percentage of single mothers accused of infanticide

[1] This observation is borne out in the modern media-circus atmosphere surrounding the infamous cases of Andrea Yates, Casey Anthony, and others.

"overwhelmingly predominated" the 133 instances of child murder she reviewed from royal and ecclesiastical court records of the late thirteenth to early sixteenth centuries (69). According to Butler, "[b]ecause indictments reflect accusation of infanticide, rather than actual numbers of infanticides . . . jurors believed single mothers were more inclined to carry out infanticide" (70).

The existence of a "generalized culture anxiety" about infanticide, as well as the reported cases of infanticide, indicates that the narrator's resolution to act in her own interest rather than passively accept the role of a powerless betrayed maiden may not have been uncommon. The scribe's apparent decision to change the object of the narrator's curse from the child to the father may have been an effort to mitigate the stark implication of infanticide which would not be acceptable for inclusion in a priest's commonplace book.[2]

Alternatively, "Sir John Doth Play" may have been written as a protest (in the manner of Robin Hood legends) against the Norman conquerors and feudal system. The lyric was written in the vernacular Middle English and, thus, of the common populace. It is also written in the ring dance form, as indicated by the burden which is designed to be sung between each stanza, a form that was popular in the thirteenth century. Although the manuscript itself is fifteenth century, the lyric may have been composed much earlier and its oral transmission at least into the latter part of fifteenth century (when it was inscribed in the manuscript) is indicative of a particular resonance with the English common folk. Evidence suggests that women in Anglo-Saxon England were "more nearly equal companions of their husbands and brothers than at any other period before the modern age" (Stafford 223). Thus, the Norman Conquest in 1066, introducing a military society and feudal law into England, relegated women to a subordinate status subject to patriarchal domination. In addition, based on a review of pertinent court records in London,

[2] Commonplace books, such as the manuscript in which this lyric was preserved, generally collected potential sermon sources or dance songs that could be used at church sponsored entertainments.

Wiltshire, and Yorkshire from 1218-1276, social historian John M. Carter, noting a "perceived laxity of punishment" for rape during that period, concluded that the status of women suffered during the thirteenth-century (Loengard 166). If, as indicated by the ring-dance form, the lyric was written in that time period, its plausible that the portrayal of a maiden sexually assaulted by a feudal lord is a protest against the social changes resulting from the Norman Conquest or, at least, recognition of the reduced interest in prosecuting rape during this period. The scribe's inclusion of the lyric, along with a Robin Hood ballad, in the manuscript may be indicative of the scribe's interest in such protests.

In any event, as discussed in the next section, despite the lyric's intriguing interpretative potential, it has been repeatedly dismissed as a conventional love poem or antifeminist satire by modern editors and literary critics.

III.

Although close examination of the lyric narrative and related medieval English legal and cultural concepts suggests alternative interpretations or at least lines of inquiry, the academic commentary pertaining to the lyric is remarkable in never considering anything beyond the commonplace. The manuscript was not available to the general public. The lyric was first re-introduced to the public in The Early English Carols, Richard Leighton Greene's collection published in 1935 of "all those Middle and Early Modern English texts . . . extant and accessible in manuscript or printed sources of date earlier than 1550 to which, in the editor's judgment, the term 'carol' can properly be applied" (vii). The lyric, entitled only as "No. 456," appears within Greene's grouping of "Amorous Carols" (308-309). In his note, Greene referred to the lyric as "Waking the Well," noting that it had been previously published in an 1841 volume edited by

Thomas Wright and J. O. Halliwell, Reliquiae Antiquae, and as an illustration of an article in W.C. Hazlitt's 1905 Faith and Folklore (448). Greene summarizes the lyric as follows:

> The false step related by the girl who is the speaker in this carol may be the result of her participation in a merry-making at some well, probably a 'holy' well. . . . These festivals were, of course, of pagan origins and were unsuccessfully combated and then more successfully given a Christian coloring by the Church. . . . St. John's Eve was a favoured time for these wakes, a time when license was prone to occur as part of the festivities. . . .
>
> An equally possible explanation of the carol is that the girl was observing a New Year's custom, not social, but solitary, of going to gather what was called 'the cream of the well', the first water drawn from it in the year, and that she was there surprised by the persuasive wooer. Stza. 2 suggests such an episode rather than a crowded festival.
>
> Sir John is probably the village priest, or at any rate a cleric. Chaucer's Nun's Priest is named Sir John . . . . (Greene 448).

Greene glosses various words from the stanzas, explaining that a "croke" was "crooked staff, like a shepherd's," a "bel and boke" was used for "excommunication, a common medieval oath," and "rofe" meant "stole,' while "bell-ey" was a "prize, treasure." Greene concludes that in stanza four "Sir John tried to make his peace with gifts" and, with regard to stanza five, "The young girl of this carol is more practical in her outlook than the heroines of Nos. 454[3], 455[4]" (449).

[3] IMEV No. 3594, the story of the "wyley clerke" (Brown & Robbins 574; Greene 308).
[4] IMEV No. 1330, "Y loued a childe of this cuntre" (Brown & Robbins 211; Greene 308).

Thus, in its first modern publication, the lyric was introduced as a song of a "persuasive wooer" and a "practical" maiden. Despite the intervening decades, exposure to new theories of literary criticism, and enhanced feminist sensibilities, there has been no serious re-evaluation of Greene's initial summary.

In 1941, Brown and Robbins published The Index of Middle English Verse wherein they indexed "all poems written in English before 1500" by their first line, to facilitate scholarly research. In the Index, the lyric is identified by its first line, "The last tyme I the wel woke," as number "3409" (543). The accompanying notation indicates "The Betrayed Maiden's Lament[5]– five quatrains and burden" (ix, 543). "No. 3409" does not, however, appear in Brown and Robbins' subject index for "Betrayed Maiden" which references only No. 225, "The Serving Maid's Holiday," and No. 1825, "Ladd Y the daunce a Myssomur Day" or "Jack and the Dancing Maid, an erotic carol" (37, 290, 744).

In 1950, Robbins published a compilation, Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries, which included the lyric, designated as "No. 25; A Betrayed Maiden's Lament," within the category "Popular Songs" and subcategory "Love Songs" (19). In his review of the lyric in its original manuscript, Robbins presents the last word in the second stanza as "kell [-ey]" (19). He also notes that "we were" is struck through in line 12 of the third stanza ("I was beguiled") and that in line 18 of the fifth stanza, the scribe struck through "childe" which was replace with "fadur" (20). In his introductory comments, Robbins explains that Middle English poetry, divided into the "courtly" and the "popular" was, in effect, a reflection of the social

[5] Although Brown and Robbins indicate that the lyric is a "Betrayed Maiden's Lament" in the notes accompanying the lyric, they do not list the lyric under "Betrayed maiden" in their "Subject and Title Index." The two poems listed under "Betrayed maiden" in the the "Subject and Title Index" are: 225 (also known as "The Serving Maid's Holiday" and 1825 (also known as "Ladd Y the daunce a Myssomur Day" or "Jack and the Dancing Maid, an erotic carol") (Brown & Robbins 37, 290, 744). This is likely just an oversight.

stratification of medieval society and, as such, the songs in his popular songs category illustrated "the poems circulated among the 'lewd,'" that is, songs sung at "popular gatherings in the hall, in the inn, on the green, on the road" (xxxiii-xxxiv). Robbins specifically included No. 25 in his general introductory comment that "[t]he majority of the popular love songs deal with the customary progress of young love, and frequent were the complaints of betrayed maidens (Nos. 21, 23-29)" (xxxvii). In his endnote to another song (No. 15), Robbins observed "These love poems, Nos. 15 to 32, are among the freshest and most charming of all early English compositions," concluding that they were "genuinely popular, as is shown by their realistic content, their simple form, and their casual manner of preservation" (233). By including No. 25 ("Sir John Doth Play") in his comments, Robbins indicates that the admittedly realistic narrative of rape was a "customary" and acceptable act of "young love."

Although it appeared in published form in the trilogy of compilations published to facilitate scholarly inquiry into Middle English lyrics (Greene's The Early English Carols, Brown and Robbins' The Index of Middle English Verse, and Robbins' Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries), academic interest in the lyric remains negligible. In 1951, Arthur K. Moore published The Secular Lyric in Middle English, claiming in his introduction that it was the first extensive study of secular Middle English lyrics. He observed that poets in the "transitional" (fifteenth) century between the Middle Ages and Renaissance appeared "astonishingly indifferent to the slaughter of the War of the Roses, the mounting social tensions, and the basic considerations of human existence" (155). Although recognizing the indifference of poets to human suffering, Moore himself was indifferent to the narrator's anguish and the consequences of rape, characterizing "Sir John Doth Play" as one of "two otherwise trivial

seduction carols . . . important for the light they throw on heathen survivals," *i.e.,* waking the well (Moore 179). Moore relates:

> The association of well-waking with St. John's Eve connects the observance to the complex of traditions entering into Midsummer festivals, of which bathing in the sea, spring, or river was regarded as spiritual ablution. The festival had always been a mating period, and considerable license was no doubt permitted in European celebrations. The purpose for which the girl sought the well in this instance is not made clear, for the wake is interrupted by 'Ser John," doubtless a priest who peremptorily seduces her. (180.)

Moore then goes on to describe "Ladd Y the daunce a Myssomer Day" wherein "Jack, the 'holy-water clerk, lures the girl away and the song ends on an indecent note." In conclusion, Moore opines that although "[t]he plain diction and realistic statements contrast favorably with the decorative verse of the times, . . . simplicity does not alone make a folk song" and, accordingly, "[t]here seems no very good reason for thinking this and the preceding piece [Sir John Doth Play] of a separate class from other loose carols" (180).

No further published reference to the lyric appears until 1964, when Jane L. Curry wrote a brief comment published in English Language Notes, focusing solely on folk customs relevant to an explanation of "waking the well." In the course of her remarks, Curry declares that Greene was erroneous in suggesting (in The Early English Carols) that the narrator was alone at the well or that the initial events necessarily occurred at night (1-4).

Two years later (1966), Greene responds, taking issue with Curry's interpretation of his remarks and pointing her attention to his note in The Early English Carols wherein he states "An equally possible explanation of the carol is that the girl was observing a New Year's custom, not

social but solitary, of going to gather what was called the 'cream of the well', the first water drawn from it in the year, and that she was *surprised by the persuasive wooer*" (Greene ELN 4-5, emphasis added). What is remarkable about this exchange is that, in focusing their dispute on the lyric's relationship to the "well-waking" tradition, both scholars ignored the violence of Sir John's actions and, moreover, in 1966 Greene implicitly reaffirms his early (1930s) characterization of those actions as "persuasive" wooing.

In 1974, the lyric was included as number "84" in the Norton Critical Anthology Middle English Lyrics edited by Maxwell S. Luria and Richard L. Hoffman (82). The editors' gloss accompanying the lyric indicates that a "*croke"* is a "crooked staff" and that *"And rove* [sic] *my kell-ey"* should be interpreted as "rent/maidenhead." (83). Thus, the clear import of Sir John's actions, as identified in the gloss, is that Sir John caught the narrator with a staff, laid her on the ground, and tore her maidenhead. There is no editorial introduction to the lyric and none of the critical essays included in the anthology refer to the lyric.

In 1977 the second edition of The Medieval Lyric, a study of lyrical traditions, was published. In his postscript to this volume, Peter Dronke observes that the study of medieval lyrics vastly expanded in the preceding decade (since the publication of the first edition) but "as regards the interpretation of medieval lyrics, much remains to be done" (234). Dronke specifically points out that "[i]t is becoming more widely recognized that the historical understanding of medieval lyric is inseparable from sensitive interpretation of the texts . . ." (234). Also, noting that "*a priori* constructs, which became current seventy or eighty years ago, have fitted actual texts poorly," Dronke predicts that "[t]he sociological implications of the lyrics will be elicited gradually, by meticulous reading, from the lyrics themselves" (234). Dronke did not include "Sir John Doth Play" in his book and, despite his recommendation for an unrestricted

re-examination of medieval lyrics, the lyric has not yet been closely examined or sensitively interpreted.

The publication of Vox Feminae in 1984, a collection of essays related to songs of medieval women, reflects the feminist movement of the latter twentieth century. In "The Woman's Song in Middle English and its European Backgrounds," John F. Plummer noted, however, that the interest was focused primarily on "Old English and continental examples of woman's songs" and that Middle English woman's song[6]s continued to attract "almost no critical attention" (135). Despite lamenting the lack of critical attention given to Middle English woman's songs, Plummer failed to critically examine this lyric (which he refers to as Index No. 3409) even though it is one of only (by his estimation) eighteen "woman's songs" in Middle English.[7] Plummer does not examine the lyrics individually but rather categorizes them all within a conventional genre, explaining that observing that woman's songs, particularly those of clerical seduction, were closely related to the anti-feminist *fabliaux* tradition.[8] After stating generally that the "lament of lost maidenhood is found in a number of Middle English songs," Plummer references "Sir John Doth Play" in his observation that the "seemingly conventional … speaker's claim to have been tricked" is exemplified in several lyrics including the claim by "the speaker in Index 3409" who "also insists she 'was begyled-ay'" (144). Plummer concludes that Sir John is a cleric because clerics "dominate the list of seducers in English laments" and "[a]mong those named are two Sir Johns. . . " (144). Accordingly, Plummer's analysis of "Sir

[6] The songs attributed to or narrated by medieval women are referred to by some medieval scholars as "woman's songs," while other medieval scholars use the term "women's songs." The variation of usage in in this paper reflect the specific terminology used by the scholar being discussed.

[7] Plummer's list of all Middle English woman's songs (by IMEV number) includes: 225, 377, 438, 445, 1008, 1265, 1268.5, 1269.5, 1330, 1849, 2494, 2654, 3174, 3409, 3418, 3594, 3897.5, 3902.5 and "Iankyn of London," which has no IMEV number (151-152).

[8] The Gregorian Reform movement, which included an effort to "persuade the priesthood to return to celibacy," resulted in a "dramatic increase in the intensity of anti-female propaganda throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries." (Bogan 35).

John Doth Play" is not the result of a close reading of the lyric itself but, rather, embodies the ephemeral logic that Sir John is a cleric and the lyric is an ironic lament because the clerical seducer in a different lyric is named Sir John. Plummer concludes that Sir John was a clerical seducer because the stereotype of a seducer "is itself evidence of conventionality––a conventionality which suggests a tradition, an ongoing process of imitation and conscious artistry" (144). This reasoning is not only circular but problematic. Nothing in this particular lyric indicates that "Sir John" is seductive or a cleric. Plummer's theory of the relationship between the *fabliaux* and Middle English woman's songs clearly applies to other Middle English lyrics but, by insisting upon a uniform reading of all Middle English woman's songs, Plummer appears oblivious to the sexual assault depicted by the narrator. The narrator in "Sir John Doth Play" was forced, not persuaded, into participation, and her subsequent reaction to her pregnancy is one of bitter resolve not wonderment. Even accepting Plummer's analysis as correct, it is surprising that in the 1980s, a decade awash in literary feminist theory, Plummer fails to acknowledge or even notice the violence of Sir John's actions and does not explain why such actions constitute seduction rather than sexual assault.

In 1984, Garbaty introduced the lyric as "Sir John Doth Play" without explaining the title which appears nowhere else. In his introductory comment, Garbaty dismisses the lyric as one where the "clerical seducer again appears as the girl watches beside the well" with the difference being that the girl wakes to "understand the realities of the day" and that her "'welling' was more successful than she had expected" (669). Introducing another lyric ("Jack, The Nimble Holy-Water Clerk, often identified by its first line "Ladd y Daunce a Myssomer Day"), Garbaty related that "R.T. Davis feels that such songs as this, the one preceding ["Jolly Jankyn,"], and the two following ["The Servant Girls's Holiday," and "Sir John Doth Play"], of a clerical seduction

were written by clerics themselves, and the idea is a pleasing one" because "[w]hat the Church prohibited in deed might perhaps be expressed and vicariously enjoyed in song" (664).

First, considering Sir John's forceful way of enjoying himself (as evidenced in the lyric's second stanza), Garbaty's comment is disturbing in its reflection of the medieval priesthood and the twentieth-century mindset wherein sexual assault and seduction are interchangeable. Moreover, Garbaty's assumption that his conclusion (that the lyric is about clerical seduction) is based on an earlier conclusion of R.T. Davies is wrong. Davies' Medieval English Lyrics, published in 1963 and referenced by Garbaty as the purported source of his conclusion, notably does not include "Sir John Doth Play" under any title. Davies did include two lyrics often discussed in conjunction with "Sir John Doth Play", namely "Jolly Jankyn" as "Poem 73; Jankyn, the clerical seducer" and "Jack, The Nimble Holy Water Clerk" as "Poem 108; A night with a holy-water clerk." With regard to the first lyric ("Poem 73"), Davies observes that "Poems about cleric's love affairs are not uncommon and Jankin seems to have been the typical name" (162-163, 204-205). In his notes on "Poem 108," Davies relates that it was "[a] carol of clerical seduction with a burden that may be that of a popular song and "probably, like no. 73, the work of a cleric" because "[i]ts detail is vivid, strong and homely, the kissing in a convenient corner, the seduction through a pair of whitegloves, her mistress's abuse of the girl as she comes home with the milk" (347-348). The narratives of both the lyrics commented upon by Davies clearly portray young male protagonists who were clerics involved with church services: specifically, "Jolly Jankyn" performed part of the Christmas mass, singing the prayer Kyrie Eleison ("Lord have mercy upon us"), while Jack was "oure haly watur clerk." Neither cleric, Jack nor Jankyn, were referred to as "Sir Jack" or "Sir Jankyn," nor did their behavior suggest assault or imply feudal authority or class distinctions. Therefore, Davies comments and analysis of other lyrics

do not support Garbaty's assumptions as to the character of "Sir John" or the meaning of the lyric. Garbaty provides no basis beyond Davies' conclusions for his assumption that "Sir John" was a "clerical seducer."

In an essay published in 1998, Neil Cartlidge took issue with earlier assumptions and interpretations, most specifically those of Greene and Plummer, with regard to several lyrics portraying extra-marital pregnancy. Nonetheless, in regard to "Sir John Doth Play," Cartlidge remains as oblivious as his predecessors to the content of the lyric. He stated that festivals (like well-waking) "were seen as periods of license during which unprotected women were more than usually likely to become victims, not only of their own indiscretions, but also of sexual assault" (403). Yet, although recognizing the general possibility of sexual assault in connection with festivals, Cartlidge fails to acknowledge Sir John's actions as such. Specifically, after commenting that "pregnancy-lyrics often reflect the speaker's sense of contrast between the joyful, halycon days of freedom, and the pressing urgency of her oncoming delivery," Cartlidge introduces the lyric as a carol that "refers to a well-wake – a seasonal celebration which was probably a rural survival of pagan rites from the pre-Christian past" (404). Then, after presenting the lyric, Cartlidge presented the following analysis:

> The burden identifies the festival itself as the source of the girl's troubles and the carol might implicitly suggest a moral reproach to the girl in having attended such an event. Such scantily disguised relicts of paganism could well have enjoyed an unsavoury reputation in the Middle Ages. Moreover, her participation in what must already have been a strange and obsolescent custom might also have marked her rusticity, and in this way supported an impression of the girl's ignorance, as well as an appeal to the *bourgeois* worldliness of its audience. Even though the

> manuscript in which it survives was probably a clerical common-place book, the maiden's erstwhile lover is presumably once again a clerk. Like many of the Old French pastourelles, this song seems to find an essential comedy in the discrepancy of class and outlook between the country-girl and her suitor, for she seems to have been wholly taken in by the impressive aura of his literacy. She also seems to have been overwhelmed by his Frenchified vocabulary ('he made hit wondur copious . . .'.14). However, despite his blasphemously suggestive assurance in the 'grace' of her pregnancy (15-6), the final line of the song ultimately emphasize the palpability of her distress (404-405).

Cartlidge recognizes the likelihood of class differences between the narrator and "Sir John," but fails to acknowledge that Sir John's actions constitute sexual assault or the feudal implications inherent in his actions. Likewise, Cartlidge recognizes the narrator's distress over events but unquestioningly accepts the assumption that Sir John is a cleric and, inexplicably, characterizes the assault related by the narrator as a comedy and the rapist as a suitor.

In 2002, an anthology of essays written by scholars of different disciplines on medieval woman's songs, edited by Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen, was published. In her introductory essay, Klinck states that its purpose was to provide an overview of scholarly development on the subject, particularly in feminist scholarship, since *Vox Feminae* (1). Particularly noteworthy is the essay by an historian, Judith M. Bennett, who points out for apparently the first time that Sir John's actions (in "Sir John Doth Play") constitute rape. After first observing that "abandoned maidens abound in late medieval songs; their stories and laments are the most common of late medieval songs about never-married women," Bennett stated the following:

> Many fewer in number but much more upsetting in content are several texts that tell stories of rape. A carol copied into a miscellany book in the second half of the fifteenth century relates a maiden's encounter with one Sir John at a festival. He grabbed her; he swore her to secrecy; he tore her clothes; and he took her maidenhead. Afterward, he came to her house for more sex (described, unlike the rape, in terms of her pleasure as well as his) and brought wonderful gifts. The carol ends with the singer proclaiming her pregnancy and her intention to curse the father unless he supports their child. . . (Bennett 197).

Bennett then describes two other stories of rape from sixteenth century songbooks, stating in conclusion:

> These songs of wanton joy, sad abandonment, and violent rape tell contradictory stories, at once warning young women to beware of men and excusing the wrongs of men. Songs of lusty maidens caution against foolish and heedless behavior—enjoyment of holidays, acceptance of gifts, private meetings with men, among whom are an extraordinary number of clerics name John or Jack. Their presence is explained partly by anticlericalism, partly by social practices, and even partly by the amatory fantasies of the clerics who authored some songs of this sort. Yet as a man who could not marry his lover, a cleric—especially one with the most popular male forename of the time—also conveniently represented all men who loved and abandoned women. Such representations could work, then, to exculpate faithless male lovers and condemn their foolish female victims.

> In similar ways, although songs about abandoned or raped maidens warn about the ever-present hazard of predatory men, they also, as Kathryn Gravdal has shown so effectively for Old French *pastourelles,* turn tragic events into palatable stories and even amusing entertainment. One rape song depicts the victim as later accepting her rapist as a lover, and another is told with considerable wit. The abandonment and rapes of these songs create spaces within which it was possible to think about women's powerlessness in matter-of-fact, humorous, and accepting terms. Indeed, these songs so normalize rape that many modern editors have elided their chilling stories. The first has been described as a tale of a "betrayed maiden," the second as a "merry example of the battle of the sexes," and the third as incapable of precise interpretation." (Bennett 198).

Bennett, a historian, recognizes the obvious: the action depicted in "Sir John Doth Play" constitutes rape.

In 2003 The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Woman's Writing included an essay by Sarah McNamer discussing scholarly strategies for determining whether a lyric purportedly written by a woman or from a woman's viewpoint was likely to have been written by a woman. McNamer points out that such a strategy is necessary because only three late surviving Middle English lyrics are specifically attributed to women and the continental versions of female-voiced lyrics (*pastorela, alba, chansons de toile, cantigas de amigo*) clearly evidenced the male capacity for adopting a female persona (197). McNamer writes:

> . . . . [A[brief look at the most common type of female-voiced lyric in Middle English, the 'popular woman's song" can illuminate some basic criteria for separating lyrics by women from those that only purport to be so. This type of

poem usually takes the form of a carol (a lyric with a refrain) in which a young woman laments the absence of her lover or, more frequently, her seduction and abandonment by him. Because the carol itself was originally a dance song, it was once assumed that the female-voiced versions were genuinely popular in origin, reflecting an oral tradition of dance songs composed by women. While it is widely accepted that such a tradition may have existed, however, two recurrent features of most of the surviving carols suggest that they do not belong to it. First, they are ironic: one can detect a presence behind the poem, manipulating the lyric voice in such as [sic] way as to satirize the speaker. Such satire is clearly evident in poems which function as confessions of sexual adventure and consequent downfall, the maiden who yields to her seducer being not only betrayed in the end, but left pregnant:

. . . .

Second, the background situation and the female voice itself are often overdramatized: the woman's voice issues from a fully developed female persona, whose femaleness is often foregrounded through references to her body and what her virile lover does to it ('he gafe my mayden-hed a spurne'); . . . . Such bold signals that it is a woman who speaks are, in themselves, grounds for suspecting that the source of that voice is a wry male author. But by the same token, these criteria for ruling *out* certain lyrics as products of women writers can provide grounds for ruling *in*: if a lyric written in a woman's voice is free of self-mocking irony and not over-dramatized, the possibility it was written by a woman is quite plausible (196-197).

The scholarly strategy outlined by McNamer is valid, but her application of the strategy to "Sir John Doth Play" (as indicated by her quotation from the lyric) is faulty. First, McNamer ignores the context of the line she quotes: the first two stanzas clearly recount a sexual assault, not a narrator yielding to a seducer (at least by modern legal standards wherein a rape is not negated by later consensual sex). Moreover, the narrator is neither self-mocking nor over-dramatic, but simply accurately depicts sexual assault and her eventual determination not to passively accept the situation. Thus, under McNamer's own criteria, it is quite plausible that this lyric − written in a woman's voice, free of self-mocking irony, and not over-dramatized−was written by a woman.

Klinck, the editor of the volume in which Bennett's analysis appears and, thus, presumably aware of it, edited an anthology of medieval woman's songs published in 2004, which included her own chapter on the carols of "Later Medieval England." In her chapter introduction, Klinck promisingly observes that "[o]ften woman's voice carols deal with the painful reality of sexual exploitation and subsequent abandonment" and that "[t]he light mode of dance-song downplays the potentially tragic theme, and many of the poems seem to reflect the knowing humor of a male circle-but the pathos remains" (133). In addition, Klinck selected the lyric ("Sir John Doth Play") which she identifies by its opening line (and translates as "I have forsworn it while I live") and introduces it in this way: "Again, the speaker has been taken advantage of on a festive occasion, her by the parish priest as indicated by his title 'Sir' John. The apparently cheerful 'ey' refrain suggests his callousness—and her bitterness" (140). In her gloss of the second stanza, Klink translates "he gafe my maidenhead a spurne and rofe my bell-ey" as "tore my cloak [with sexual innuendo]" (141 brackets in original). In her textual notes, Klinck relates "Greene comments: 'Sir John is probably the village priest, or at any rate a cleric.'

Brown prints *kell-ey* (13) and glosses *Kell* 'maidenhead'" (174). Thus, even after editing the book in which Bennett points out the obvious, that Sir John's actions constitute sexual assault, Klinck includes the lyric in an anthology of medieval woman's songs without critically reassessing the lyric, even if only to dispute Bennett's interpretation.

IV

The author of "Sir John Doth Play" is unknown and, thus, authorial gender and intent cannot be easily determined. Plummer insists that the author of "Sir John Doth Play" was not female, although acknowledging that Middle English women's[9] songs were related to popular continental songs and, thus, part of a long vernacular lyric tradition. Rather, he insists that Middle English women's songs reflect the antifeminism[10] of the period, as well as class tensions spawned by the increasing upward social mobility of the fifteenth century, and therefore could only have been authored by men. Plummer refuses to accept the possibility that any of the maidens' laments were autobiographical because "[t]here is no conceivable motivation for such self-exposure, in the fifteenth century or the twentieth: it is not merely that the speakers confess promiscuity-they confess ignorance" (Plummer 150). Such a statement suggests that Middle English lyrics were only performed by the author rather than, as indicated by its ring-dance format, designed for dance and performance for gatherings unacquainted with the original songwriter and of such longevity and popularity that they were copied into a manuscript long after the original author was dead. Moreover, other factors indicate that the lyric was not anti-feminist in nature and, plausibly, could have been written by a woman.

[9] Middle English lyrics narrated in a female voice are referred to as "women's songs" by some literary critics but as "woman's song" by others, as such the different terms reflect that used by the critic being discussed.
[10]According to Plummer, the following eighteen lyrics (indicated by IMEV number) constitute the entirety of Middle English women's songs: 225, 377, 438, 445, 1008, 1265, 1268.5, 1269.5, 1330, 1849, 2494, 2654, 3174, 3409, 3418, 3594, 3897.5, 3902.5 and "Iankyn of London," which has no IMEV number (151-152).

The difficulty of analyzing any Middle English lyric is exacerbated by the absence, as in this case, of authorial context and the relative scarcity of other similar Middle English secular works. Of the surviving 474 Middle English lyrics (also referred to as carols) compiled by Greene, over 400 appear to be religious in nature. The importance or popularity of secular lyrics in medieval culture cannot be assessed solely on the basis of their relative survival rate in comparison to religious lyrics because, prior to the printing press, the primary means for recording and preserving literary works was the monastic scriptorium which focused on duplicating pious Christian works (Moore 3). Therefore, an effective, if not purposeful, censorship skews the relative number of surviving religious and secular lyrics. The whimsical nature of what was included in a manuscript (and, thus, survived in posterity) is evidenced by the source manuscript in this case, a manuscript held in the Cambridge University library, generally identified as Cambridge University MS. Ff. 5. 48 (Greene 341). The source manuscript is from the late fifteenth or even early sixteenth century but that is evidence only of the date the lyric was copied, not the date of its origin.

The manuscript itself provides little insight into the lyric. "Sir John Doth Play" is the only female-narrated secular lyric included (Plummer 151-152; Hamer 15). The manuscript is apparently a priest's commonplace book with a varied content, including religious tracts ("Myrc's 'Instructions for Parish Priests'" and "two lamentations for the Virgin"), ballads, verses, and treatises such as "The ABC of Aristotle," a Robin Hood ballad, "a tale in verse of an incestuous daughter," the "Tale of the adulterous Squire of Falmouth, and a dialogue between a nightingale and a clerk."[11] Thus, in the context of the manuscript content (religious tracts, as well as tale of immorality and adultery) it is likely that the lyric was included for its potential as a dire

[11] The index to the IMEV indicates the other contents of the manuscript by IMEV number: 73, 365, 483, 559, 622, 961, 988, 1105, 1107, 1441, 1452, 1534, 1899, 1907, 2052, 2119, 2354, 2615, 2619, 2658, 2989, 3029, 3409, 4035, 4053, 4155, 4185. (Hamer 15).

warning of the consequences that befell those who stray from church teachings and embrace old pre-Christian traditions.

According to John C. Hirsch, one "circumstance which informs English lyrics . . . is the extent to which women, sometimes apparently excluded from medieval authorship, wrote them" (Hirsh 7). But the adoption of a female speaking voice does not necessarily indicate the author's gender as, within the overwhelmingly male-dominated medieval literary tradition, the use of the female voice or persona often functioned "as a carrier of undercurrents of social values not generally permitted or approved" (Earnshaw 13). Ordinarily repressed "fears and oppositions" could be cloaked in the female persona of a peasant or poor urban girl and, thus, allow "[o]fficially unpopular ideas and thoughts" to be voiced through the device of a speaker whose low status served to limit the liability of the poet (Earnshaw 14). Thus, even if not specifically authored by a woman, "Sir John Doth Play" could have been written in protest against Norman feudal authority.

The songs were also designed to be cautionary. Because the social destiny of adolescent women in medieval society was to wed, late medieval songs, "many of which were sung and danced at the very sales, saints' feasts, and markets at which single women were often led astray – helped to guide young women along this prescribed path" (Bennett 194). Thus, "maidens as objects of male sexual desire" predominate in cautionary tales, giving fictional life to the sorts of women who encountered lustful men and "to abandoned maidens who foolishly loved and lost, and to maidens who were victims of rape" (Bennett 194-95). Thus, late medieval songs were entertaining but, by way of stories and prurient scenarios, "they also admonished real maidens to avoid behavior that so often left fictional maidens in unhappy circumstances" (195). Clearly, as

Cartlidge suggests, “Sir John Doth Play” may have been written or, at least, preserved as cautionary tale against participation in pagan festivals.

Maureen Fries, a contemporary of Plummer, found that Simone de Beauvoir’s analysis of forces that subordinate women to men, effectively designating woman as the “Other,” is true in most literature but “especially apparent in medieval literature” (155). According to Fries, late medieval British woman’s songs share several traits with their European antecedents: (1) the woman’s song centers upon a particular beloved man; (2) the female voice is culturally distinguishable from the male by its expression in the vernacular or dialect as opposed to a learned tongue;” (3) the female narrator “is absorbed in the experience of the beloved’s presence in or absence from her arms, a passive experience as opposed to that world of male activity which occupies most of his life;” (4) she is “rhetorically dominant but actually powerless in her attempts to confine the man within the bounds of her feminine world;” and (5) while conforming to rigid linguistic and sex-role definitions found in the continental antecedents, the secular woman’s song in late medieval literature “demonstrates an occasional capacity for satirizing the conventional mode . . . and it is this tendency towards satire which most aptly characterizes secular woman’s song in late medieval British literature” (159). As discussed in previous sections, “Sir John Doth Play” is generally interpreted to fit within these conventions, but a closer examination reveals that, even though the narrator speaks in the vernacular, her song is not centered upon a “beloved man,” she does not passively accept her situation or appear to feel powerlessness, and there is nothing satirical in her recitation of the sexual assault or her resolve to act in her own interest.

More recently, Bennett pointed out that a key factor in decoding authorial intent (and thereby, perhaps, author gender) is a simple determination of whose interests the narrator is

voicing (Bennett 191). McNamer stated that "if a lyric written in a woman's voice is free of self-mocking irony and not over-dramatized, the possibility it was written by a woman is quite plausible" (197). Under both the Bennett and McNamer tests, the female narrator of "Sir John Doth Play" clearly speaks in her own interest and it is free of self-mockery or dramatization. Therefore, it is plausible that "Sir John Doth Play" was written by a woman.

V.

Finally, a comparison of six analogous Middle English lyrics indicates that "Sir John Doth Play" was not an anomaly in voicing a woman's perspective. Of the eighteen surviving Middle English lyrics narrated in a female voice, five are analogous to "Sir John Doth Play in that the action related by the narrator results in her pregnancy. Plummer's theory of clerical seduction and antifeminist satire is easily applicable to three of them: "The Serving Maid's Holiday" (IMEV No. 225), "Jolly Jankyn" (IMEV No. 377), and "Jack, the Nimble Holy Water Clerk" a/k/a "Midsummer's Day Dance" (IMEV 1849).

The first (IMEV 225) relates the story of a serving maid who shares a holiday (also spelled holyday) with her lover, Jakke (also spelled Jacke) and then finds that her "wombe began te swelle/A[s] greth a belle," to her employer's displeasure. (Brown & Robbins 37; Greene 306-307; Robbins 24-25). As observed by Cartlidge, the narrator "constantly undermines her own dignity with what she reveals about herself" as she rushes through her chores in anticipation of the prospect of going to an ale house at the festival to get drunk with her lover, only to be followed by "remorseful consciousness of pregnancy" (402-3). A similarly naïve narrator in "Jolly Jankyn" (IMEV No. 377) parodies the mass and results in the narrator's discovery that, as a result of Jankyn winking at her and stepping on her foot, "Alas, I go with childe" (Garbaty 663). The narrator's story of seduction in "Midsummer's Day Dance" (IMEV 1849) is graphic,

beginning with a wink and a dance, progressing to bed where "He prikede and he pransed, nold, he neuer lynne," and ending with the discovery of pregnancy when "my gurdul a-ros, my wombe wax out" (Greene 308). These three lyrics featuring gullible, easily-seduced women clearly fit within a conventional standard supporting the accepted assumption of critics like Plummer, Garbaty, and others that Middle English woman's songs are anti-feminist and satirical. Likewise, the references to the religious services and activities in "Jolly Jankyn:" and "Jack, The Holy Water Clerk" clearly support Garbaty's conclusion that clerical authors fantasizing about sexual adventures wrote some lyrics.

But although three of the six lyrics fit within the long-established and comfortable categories, a closer look at the remaining three undermines the apparent assumption of early literary critics that all of the Middle English lyrics narrated in a female voice necessarily fit within the accepted convention. Clearly, other possible interpretations exist and should be explored. Cartlidge's examination of the other "Betrayed Maiden's Lament," IMEV 3594, indicates that all the lyrics do not necessarily fit within the convention and, concomitantly, that the early interpretations of the lyrics are not sacrosanct. Specifically, IMEV 3594 recounts the tale of a maiden who "mete a clerke,/ *And* he was wylly in hys werke," and after "hys wyll I hym lete," she later discovers that "Now wyll not my gurdyll met" (Greene 308). The narrator's solution to the problem pregnancy is to tell everyone that she has been on a pilgrimage. As with "Sir John Doth Play," early commentators interpreted the lyric to fit squarely within conventional concepts of antifeminist satire. However, such an interpretation is necessarily based on a misreading of the lyric to mean that the pregnancy was the result of a pilgrimage. As Cartlidge points out:

[t]he speaker makes it quite clear that her claim to have been on a pilgrimage is a response to her difficulties, and not the cause of them (‘qwat xal I sey. . .’. At the end of the third stanza she is apparently racking her brains for a remedy: at the end of the fourth, seems to have found one, for she is in control of her own love-affairs once again. It appears that, having gone away in order to conceal the pregnancy and birth from her own community, she has used pilgrimage as the pretext for her absence. Even though she recounts the crisis in the present tense, her final perspective upon her adventure-that of relief rather than regret is apparently represented on in the burden.

Plummer’s misinterpretation of the first line seems to have been supported by his understanding of the second, for he apparently assumes that the manuscript” “I am madyn gane” means “I am no longer a maiden’/I have lost my maidenhead”. The MED[12] provides no support for this reading; and it is at least problematical to regard ‘gane’ here as the part particple of *goon*, not only because the rhyme with ‘fayn’ could not have been a good one, but also because this form is unlikely to have been used as far south as Norfolk. It seems to me that the speaker is celebrating the restoration of the *status quo ante quem.* . . .

The maiden’s use of the word ‘lete’ in line 15 [Now wyll I not lete for no [r]age/With me a clerk for to pley.] is significantly ambiguous. It could mean . . . allow’ . . ., or it could mean “prevent’ . . . . the first is likely to be the surface-meaning, making the maiden’s ultimate thought a rueful resolution not to be tripped in this way again’ but assuming the the poem does celebrate her escape from the consequences of her sexual encounter with the clerk, the second, more

[12] Medieval English Dictionary.

> mischievous mean, lurks – having escaped once, why should she not run the risk again? Thus, the carol challenges our responses by presenting the speaker as a model both of ingenuousness and of rustic cunning – on the one hand, a weak and easy victim to the lascivious clerk, and on the other, a resourceful and strong-willed young woman (Cartlidge 396-97).

Like the narrator of "Sir John Doth Play," the speaker does not tell her tale in a self-mocking or overly dramatic manner and, as Cartlidge aptly points out, the speaker does not passively accept her fate but actively seeks to set her own course. As previously discussed, however, Cartlidge fails to recognize similar errors with regard to "Sir John Doth Play."

Finally, the third woman's song, entitled by Greene and Robbins as "A Forsaken Maiden's Lament," recounts the simple tale of a woman who "loued a child of this cuntre,/And so Y wende he ad do me" but, although he "seyde to me he wolde be trewe, . . .now y syke & am pale of hewe" and "he is far" (Greene 308, 448; Robbins 17-18). Similar to the expanding girdle in the story of the servant girl's holiday, the narrator's revelation that, after her lover had his way with her, she is sick and pale of hue indicates pregnancy. Notably, Greene includes it as "455" in his "Amorous Carols" section, in the midst of the five other five pregnancy-outcome lyrics, immediately before "Sir John Doth Play" ("456") and after the "Betrayed Maiden's Lament" ("454") discussed by Cartlidge (Greene 308; "The Serving Maid's Holiday" is "452", "Jolly Jankyn" is "457", and "Jack, the Nimble Holy Water Clerk" a/k/a "Midsummer's Day Dance" is "453"). Although Plummer includes the lyric in his list of Middle English woman's songs (IMEV 1330), he does not reference the lyric in his discussion of woman's songs as antifeminist satire related to *fabliaux,* nor does Cartlidge include it in his discussion of extra-marital pregnancy. Although this lyric is not as explicit in its portrayal of the narrator's situation, the

inference that she is pregnant is clear. The maiden does not advance a bold solution, such as a pilgrimage or infanticide, to her altered state but, similar to "Sir John Doth Play,' the narrator's plight is poignant, reflecting the reality of a woman who finds herself alone and pregnant.

Read together, these lyrics suggest that while early critics were not wrong in construing some of them as antifeminist satires, that interpretation cannot be all inclusive and should not be accepted as sacrosanct. Moreover, while my interpretation of "Sir John Doth Play" may not be wholly correct, the existence of two other outlier lyrics suggest, at the very least, that Middle English lyrics are ripe for re-examination.

Conclusion

Medieval narratives often reflect contemporaneous social and cultural reality, but the reality that has survived in medieval manuscripts often reflects the social class and gender of the author. Nonetheless, "even given the limitations and difficulties of class barriers, male authorship, and paternal domination, fleeting glimpses of contemporaneous reality, even that of the lower classes, can sometimes be derived through a close study of the literature" (Stiller 8). "Sir John Doth Play" is one of those instances, I would argue, of reality peering through the ages.

As Adrienne Rich observes, "Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of enter-ing an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" because "[u]ntil we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (Rich 2). The critical history related to "Sir John Doth Play" is a microcosm of "[t]he power relations inscribed in the form of conventions within our literary inheritance . . . reify[ing] the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large" (Kolodny 147). In providing a unique conjunction between the medieval and modern woman's reality, "Sir John Doth Play" reinforces the value of constant reevaluation of

underlying assumptions and accepted interpretations of both gender relations and the literary canon.

Works Cited

Bennett, Judith M. "Ventriloquisms: when Maidens Speak in English Songs, c. 1300-1500," eds. Klinck, Anne L. and Ann Marie Rasmussen, Medieval Woman's Song. Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania P., 2002: 187-204.

Boffey, Julie. "Middle English Lyrics and Manuscripts," Duncan, Thomas G., Ed., A Companion to the Middle English Lyric. Cambridge: Brewer, 2005.

Bogin, Meg. The Women Troubadours. New York: Norton, 1980.

Boureau, Alain. The Lord's First Night; The Myth of the Droit de Cuissage. Chicago: U of Chicago P., 1998.

Boynton, Susan. "Women's Performance of the Lyric Before 1500," eds. Klinck, Anne L. and Ann Marie Rasmussen, Medieval Woman's Song. Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania P., 2002: 47-65.

Brown, Carleton and Rossell Hope Robbins. The Index of Middle English Verse. New York: Columbia UP, 1943.

Butler, Sara M. "A Case of Indifference?: Child Murder in Later Medieval England," Journal of Women's History 19 (2007): 59-82.

Cartlidge, Neil. "'Alas I go with Chylde': Representations of Extra-marital Pregnancy in the Middle English Lyric," English Studies 5 (1998): 395-414.

Catty, Jocelym. Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England; Unbridled Speech. New York: St. Martin's, 1999.

Chamberlain, Stephanie. "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England," College Literature 3 (2005): 72-91.

Cormack, Margaret. "Introduction: Approaches to Childbirth in the Middle Ages,"

Journal of the History of Sexuality 21 (2012): 201-207.

Curry, Jane L. "Waking the Well," ELN 2 (1964): 1-4.

Davies, R.T., Medieval English Lyrics. Evanston: Northwestern UP., 1974.

Dalton, Michael. The Countrey Justice (1618), ed. Horwitz, Morton J., and Stanley N. Katz. New York: Arno, 1972.

Dronke, Peter. The Medieval Lyric, 2nd Edition London: Cambridge UP, 1977.

Duncan, Thomas Gibson. Late Medieval English Lyrics and Carols 1400-1530 (1995) London: Penguin, 2000.

Earnshaw, Doris. The Female Voice in Medieval Romance Lyric. New York: Lang, 1988.

Fries, Maureen. "The 'Other" Voice: Woman's Song, its Satire and its Transcendance in Late Medieval British Literature," Vox Feminae; Studies in Medieval Woman's Song, Plummer, John F., Ed. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1981: 155-178.

Fulford, Tim. "Fallen Ladies and Cruel Mothers: Ballad Singers and Ballad Heroines in the Eighteenth Century," The Eighteenth Century 47 (2006): 309-329.

Garbaty, Thomas J. Medieval English Literature (1984) Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1997.

Garrett, Cynthia E. "Sexual Consent and the Art of Love in the Early Modern English Lyric," SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 44 (2004): 37-58.

Greene, Richard Leighton. The Early English Carols (1935) St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly, 1971.

---. "Troubling the Well-Waters," ELN 4 (1966):406.

Hamer, Richard. A Manuscript Index to the *Index of Middle English Verse* London:

British Library, 1995

Harris-Stoertz, Fiona. "Pregnancy and Childbirth in Twelfth-and Thirteenth-Century French and English Law," Journal of the History of Sexuality 21 (2012): 263-281.

Hatto, H.T. "The Lime-Tree and Early German, Goliard and English Lyric Poetry," The Modern Language Review 49 (1954): 193-209.

Hope, Robert Charles. The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England London: Eliot (1893), reprinted http://www.antipope.org/feorag/wells/hope/introcuction.html

Hirsh, John C., ed. Medieval Lyric: Middle English Lyyrcis, Ballads, and Carols. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Hollister, C. Warren. "The Norman Conquest and the Genesis of English Feudalism," The American Historical Review 66 (1961): 641-663.

Klinck, Anne L. and Ann Marie Rasmussen. Medieval Woman's Song. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002.

Klinck, Anne L. "Sappho and Her Daughters: Some Parellels Between Ancient and Medieval Woman's Song," Klinck, Anne L. and Ann Marie Rasmussen, Eds. Medieval Woman's Song. Philadelphia: U. Penn Press: 2002: 15-28.

Leyser, Henrietta. Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500. London: Phoenix, 2001.

Luria, Maxwell S. and Richard L. Hoffman. Middle English Lyrics. New York: Norton, 1974.

Loengard, Janet Senerowitz. "Legal History and the Medieval Englishwoman: A Fragmented View," Law and History Review 4 (1986): 161-178.

McNamer, Sarah. "Lyrics and Romances," Medieval Women's Writing, Dinshaw,

Carolyn and David Wallace, Eds. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003: 195-209.

Moore, Arthur K. The Secular Lyric in Middle English. Lexington: U. of Kentucky P., 1951.

Ovid. The Art of Love, and Other Poems, trans. Mozley, J.H. London: Heinemann, 1939.

Paden, William D., ed. Medieval Lyric: Genres in Historical Context. Chicago: U. of I.P. , 2000.

Plummer, John F. "The Woman's Song in Middle English and its European Backgrounds," Vox Feminae; Studies in Medieval Woman's Song, Plummer, John F., Ed. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1981: 135-154.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" (1971). Reprinted http://www.nbu.bg/webs/amb/american/5/rich/writing.htm

Riess, Edmund. "A Critical Approach to the Middle English Lyric," College English 27 (1966): 373-379.

Robbins, Russell Hope, ed. Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries (1952) London: Oxford UP (1961).

Speirs, John. Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition London: Faber & Faber(1957): 63-64,

Stafford, Pauline. "Women and the Norman Conquest," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 4 (1994): 221-249.

Stiller, Nikki. Eve's Orphans; Mothers and Daughters in Medieval English Literature. Westport; Greenwood, 1980.

Summit, Jennifer. "Women and Authorship," Medieval Women's Writing, ed. Dinshaw,

Carolyn and David Wallace, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003: 91-108.

VITA

The author was born in Fukuoka, Japan. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in art history from Newcomb College of Tulane University in 1978. She obtained her Master's degree in modern European history from Tulane Graduate School in 1985 and her law degree from Tulane Law School in 1978. She is a member of the Louisiana State Bar.