Cervone, Cristina Maria, and Nicholas Watson, eds. 2023. *What Kind of a Thing Is a Middle English Lyric?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Pp. xvi + 546. ISBN 9780812253900.

Reviewed by Ad Putter
University of Bristol

This substantial and invigorating collection of essays invites readers to look at Middle English lyrics with fresh eyes and to reflect on the kinds of value judgements that have made them seem unexciting compared with modern lyrics. Taken as a whole, the chapters provide a sympathetic reassessment of Middle English lyrics in the social and aesthetic contexts in which they made sense and can still speak to us today. Most Middle English lyrics are not interested in creating the illusion of an individual's emotive utterance; rather, they assume a collective voice and invite a collective response. To quote from the editors' introduction:

> the *we* of the Middle English enacts a reading experience of a sort quite different from that expected by the New Criticism. The intersubjective dialogue that lies at the heart of Middle English lyric underlines a sense of lyric value that does not valorize the solitary poet but draws on its audience for an active role. (28)

This not only sums up the argument of one of the chapters in the book—"The Lyric Christ" by Barbara Zimbalist—but also describes the effect of the poem that serves as the epigram of the introduction: "Why stonde we? Why go we noght?" The desired participation of an audience is perhaps most apparent in those Middle English lyrics that offer words as accompaniments to activities such as carolling. This dependence on social situations highlights another weakness of "the New Criticism," namely its emphasis on the words on the page. In extreme cases, such as the Rawlinson lyric "Ich am of Irlaunde," the words do not mean much when they are isolated from the play world of the round dance. To understand such poems, we need to be educated about the rules of the dance. Unfortunately, the pioneering work of Conrad Laforte in this area is still waiting to be discovered by Middle English specialists (perhaps because it is written in French), though several contributors do offer general reflections on the relationship between dance and poetry by engaging with the more abstract ideas of Seeta Chaganti, and especially with her monograph (Chaganti 2018).

Another context that gives life to the words of Middle English lyrics and that has vanished for many modern readers is the world of religious belief and practice. Even poems that are not in the least devotional, such as "Jolly Jankin*,*" take it for granted that an audience will know the basic order and Latin formulas of the mass. Margot Fassler's chapter "The Religious Lyric in Medieval England (1150–1400)" puts readers back in touch with relevant devotional and liturgical contexts. As the title of the chapter implies, the lyrics she discusses are not exclusively English ones. For example, she gives detailed attention to the Latin Christmas sequence "Letabandus" and to poems inspired by it,

including the macaronic French/Latin parody that begins "Or i parra." Other chapters in this book also address the religious dimension but do so implicitly by evoking in non-religious language the kinds of experiences that those who have participated in religious worship may have sensed. For instance, in her chapter on "Lyric Value" Ingrid Nelson discusses the play of voices in "Stond wel moder, under rode." These voices "destabilize any notion that experiences and affect are bounded within a single subject" (152). Here Derridean deconstruction meets the sentiment of Christian devotion.

Although this book has a strong unifying agenda, the essays in it are various and wide-ranging. Ardis Butterfield in "Lyric Editing" draws attention to the difficulties that editors face and create when having to extract Middle English lyrics from their context. In the case of Godric's song "Sainte Marie Virgine," this context is especially complex: there is musical notation, there is the story in which the song is embedded, and there is the further complication that the manuscripts do not agree even on such basics as the language of the poem (Latin or English?). Christopher Cannon in his chapter "Lyric Romance" explores the fuzzy boundary between romance and lyric in a case study of *King Horn*, which shares many characteristics of lyrics (including the use of refrain lines). As Cannon argues, the poem insists in all kinds of ways on its own status as a song. I have made a complementary case that *King Horn* should be regarded as song (Putter 2018). The variety of verse forms used in Middle English lyrics is the topic of an informative chapter by Ian Cornelius, who in his contribution, "Language and Meter," rightly calls for more attention to metre. The *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* contains valuable searchable data on rhyme schemes, but it does not tell us whether the rhythms of a poem are, for example, iambic or alliterative. An update that rectifies that omission is desirable. Special mention should be made of Aden Kumler's fascinating chapter "Lyric Vessels," which deals with Middle English verse inscribed on objects such as mazers and ewers. To make sense of some of this inscribed verse we need to imagine these objects in use and in motion.

The contributions to the genre by John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer are the subject of Andrew Galloway's chapter "Theory of the Fourteenth-Century Lyric." According to Galloway, "their reshapings of English poetry affirmed new interpretive communities, implying new kinds of prestige and exclusion" (341). *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) was one of the first printed anthologies of English lyrics. Its content, including courtly songs and sonnets by Wyatt, Surrey and others, implied that English lyrics had status and value, but that process of literary and social elevation had a long history in which Chaucer and Gower were key players. Their affinity with continental poets such as Eustache Deschamps, Oton de Granson, and, in Chaucer's case, Francesco Petrarch, was a relevant factor.

The non-exclusive status of most Middle English lyrics manifests itself in all kinds of other ways. Unlike medieval French lyrics, which circulated in deluxe manuscript anthologies, Middle English lyrics often circulated more haphazardly, as "filler items" between longer texts, or in the case of devotional lyrics in short sections interspersed with other religious material. An exceptional case noted by Ardis Butterfield in her chapter "Lyric Editing" is the manuscript collection containing the English poems by Charles d'Orléans (British Library, Harley, MS 682, c. 1440), but, as she points out, Charles was a Frenchman and had grown up with precisely the type of book, the *chansonnier*, that had little or no currency in English contexts. The non-exclusive status of the Middle English lyric is further reflected in matters of versification. In most

European language traditions, narrative and lyric had their own distinct formal repertoires. Dutch and German poets who had stories to tell wrote in couplets. French had the octosyllabic couplet for verse romances and assonance and monorhyme in *chansons de geste*, with lines of set length: octosyllabic (in some early fragments), decasyllabic, and alexandrines. For these languages, it is in the field of lyric that we find more intricate stanzaic forms (such as the *ballade*). What is striking about the Middle English situation is that stanza forms originally associated with lyric, for example, the tail-rhyme stanza and the rhyme royal stanza, were eagerly co-opted by English poets for narrative. The absence of a prestigious and established lyric tradition in the English vernacular may have made it much easier for Middle English poets to borrow lyric forms for storytelling.

Raymond W. Gibbs in his chapter "Cognitive Poetics of Middle English Lyric Poetry" fruitfully approaches the figurative dimension of the Middle English lyrics through the deep-seated metaphors that structure our everyday language and cognition. The figures of speech in these lyrics are not pretty window-dressing but part and parcel of the "metaphors we live by," to quote the title of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book (1980). The essay ends with a close reading of Chaucer's "Complaint unto Pity," which points out the inconsistencies in the allegorical story and concludes that "inconsistency . . . is not necessarily an impediment to readers' appreciation of allegorical messages and may, in many instances, only enhance the interpretive diversity, and aesthetic pleasures, of complex literary forms" (180). This is true but hardly original. The chapter would have benefited from engagement with previous work on allegory, notably Zeeman (2020), and with existing criticism on this poem by Chaucer which have made this point before: Simpson (2002, 128–31), and my own reading of the poem in Putter (2011).

To emphasize that medieval lyrics can still speak to us today, the book concludes with a selection of new poems inspired by medieval lyrics and two critical responses by non-medievalists: Virginia Jackson in "Response: Old Lyric Things" asks how theories of the modern lyric, including her own, stand up in the face of Middle English lyrics, while Stephanie Burt in "Response: Hevy Hameres" draws attention to the surprising connections between the medieval and contemporary lyric. In some of the early chapters, the medieval lyric was defined in opposition to the modern lyric. Burt's response cautions against facile binary oppositions: in the sphere of the lyric as in so many others (music, the visual arts) the postmodern is in many ways a reinvention of the medieval.

Not everything in this book is equally edifying in my view. There is a tendency in some of the contributions to use the sounds of Middle English words as an opportunity for free association. Miller Wolf Oberman does not seem to know that "have thin yȝe (??) into the pot" (*sic*) means "keep looking into the pot" but likes the sound of *nesche* because it "sounds so much softer than 'soft'" (379). Cristina Maria Cervone similarly sets aside all that Ferdinand de Saussure has taught us about language in order to find semantic significance in the phonemes of the poem "Myrie a time I telle In may." Responding to the line "Wan bricte blosmes brekez on tre," she admires "the brightness of the *t* and *k* that 'break' sonically to parallel how the buds break their confining and sheltering tightness when they unfurl into flowers" (66). When it comes to the word *blac* in the lyric "Summe men sayoun," the thought that *k* is "bright" has fortunately been forgotten, but she now urges us to feel the full force of this "plosive syllable." In some circles, such sonic musing may pass for sensitive close reading, but it will give literary criticism a bad name along linguists, who know for a fact that there never was and never will be a "syllable"

that is also a "plosive." Andrew Albin's chapter on "The Sound of Rollean Lyric" does not fall into the same trap, for it wisely approaches sound "not as an adjunct to verbal content but as affecting literary material in its own right" (242). There is an index which includes, under "Manuscripts," a comprehensive list of all manuscripts, and, under "Digital Index of Middle English Verse," a list of poems indexed by its entry number in this database. However, I could not find Charles d'Orléans in the index (except in parentheses after "British Library, Harley MS 682").

In a book of this size, however, readers are bound to find some things that seem amiss. What ultimately matters, in the editors' words, is that "there continues to be a pressing need for scholars interested in Middle English lyric to think expansively and teach more broadly" (29). The goal of this book was to "bring this expansive project a step closer to realization." That goal has been admirably achieved.

References

Chaganti, Seeta. 2018. *Strange Footing: Poetic Form and Dance in the Late Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Putter, Ad. 2011. "Chaucer's Complaint unto Pity and the Insights of Allegory." In *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of Jill Mann*, edited by Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan, 166–81. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

Putter, Ad. 2018. "The Singing of Medieval Romance: Stanza Forms and Contrafacta." In *Transmission of Medieval English Romance*, edited by Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson, 69–90. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

Simpson, James. 2002. *The Oxford Literary History, Volume 2: Reform and Cultural Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zeeman, Nicolette. 2020. *The Art of Disruption: Allegory and "Piers Plowman."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.