

A Study of the *Middle English Lyrics*:

The Development of Medieval Poems

Naoko Shirai

Introduction

The Middle Ages itself is not an independent period. It continues from the ancient times. Middle English Literature has close relations with Anglo-Saxon Literature as well. It is clear that a lot of poems in the Middle Ages inherit Anglo-Saxon poetic styles and themes; for instance, one poem in the text has an *ubi-sunt* motif and the riddle poems are of the Anglo-Saxon tradition.¹ Middle English Literature, however, developed new traditions because most of the poets in the Middle Ages got new ideas into their works which cannot be found in the Anglo-Saxon works. The first one, for example, is that the poets' interests inclined to more familiar objects, compared with Anglo-Saxon poets who were liable to take the nobles or the kings as their heroes; the medieval poets were rather fascinated with the love or life of common people. The second is that the poets developed various attitudes toward one object. This can be explained by the example of a gentle or mild image being added to the strong, fearful God of Old Saxon poetry. In the third place, and most different from the Anglo-Saxon poems is that much humour and playfulness were introduced into medieval works. Especially the medieval poets wrote love poems pleasantly through those tempers. This very humour gives an *English* atmosphere to the Anglo-Saxon tradition which seems to be rather exotic. These inclinations swept away the dark and melancholic atmosphere of the ancient times, and made the medieval poems joyful and vivid.

I Passionate Faith

some poems preserve the Anglo-Saxon style in their construction. Though "Where beth they biforen us weren?" is the most Anglo-Saxon among the poems which I will present later, it shows doubtlessly a new idea of the poet which is remote from the traditional atmosphere. That is the "passion", passionate faith. It is better, however, that first of all the traditional pattern be examined introducing a few comments of the great scholars:

Where beth they biforen us weren?
Houndes ladden and hawkes beren,
And hadden feld and wode;
The riche levedies in here bour,
That wereden gold in here tressour,
With here brighte rode:

Eten and drounken and maden hem glad;
Here lif was all with gamen ilad.
Men keneleden hem biforen;
They beren hem well swithe heye —
And in a twinkling of an eye
Here soules weren forloren.

Where is that laughing and that song,
That trailing and that proude gong,
Tho hawkes and tho houndes?
All that joye is went away,
That wele is comen to weylaway,
To manye harde stoundes. (1-18)²

On this part of the poem Speirs comments that the pride and transience of life are vividly and poignantly presented in these opening stanzas, though touched by a breath of the moralist's scorn for frail humankind.³ The idea of the mutability and transience of the world clearly comes out of the atmosphere of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Especially mention is needed here that this poem resembles *The Wanderer* very much in respect of not only its construction but also the contents. Compared with each stanza it is likely that the poet wrote the poem with a strong interest in *The Wanderer*.

Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mage? Hwær cwom
maþþumgyfa?
Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon
seledreamas? (92-95)⁴

The first subject of this part is an animal, a horse. It suggests hunting imagery which appears in the former half of the first stanza of the poem in the text in which the attendants on hunting are hounds and hawks. The second subject in *The Wanderer* is a man, especially a young man. Then in the medieval poem in the text the latter half mentions noble ladies. The third is a king which is suggested from its context because those who eat and drink well and keep themselves proudly are possibly kings and nobles only. Then the fourth and the last subjects are feasts which accurately appear in the first line of the third stanza of the poem in the medieval text.⁵

As Speirs says, the first three stanzas in the text have more a contempt for wealth and joy than *The Wanderer* which emphasizes only the mutability and transience of the world. This difference in emphasis between the medieval poet and the poet of *The Wanderer* can be ascribed to the spread of Christianity in the Middle Ages. In spite of its Christianity appear in *The Wanderer*. This is because Christianity had not sunk deeply enough into the hearts of contemporary people yet. Therefore the difference is noteworthy in the medieval poem. From the fourth to the last stanza the medieval poem clearly has many concrete words about Christianity.

Here paradis hy nomen here,
And now they lien in helle ifere;
The fuir it brennes evere.
Long is "ah!" and long is "oh!"
Long is "wy!" and long is "wo!"
Thennes ne cometh they nevere.

Drey here, amn, thenne, if thou wilt,
A litel pine that me thee bit;
Withdraw thine eyses ofte.
They thy pine be unrede,
And thou thenke on thy mede,

It shall thee thinken softe.

(19-30)⁶

In the fourth stanza can be seen the contrast between paradise and hell and the dogma that we will suffer long if we have joy in this world for a while. As well in the fifth stanza the word "mede" suggests a Christian doctrine and it is connected with "enduring" which the poet urges people to do in the world. To go to heaven is the "reward" for "enduring" in the world. From the sixth to the eighth stanza the poet brings "war" imagery into his poem. War exists between the believer in God and the fiend:

If that fend, that foule thing,
Thorou wikke roun, thorou fals egging,
Nethere thee haveth icast,
Up and be good chaunpioun!
Stond, ne fall nemore adoun
For a litel blast.

Thou tak the rode to thy staf,
And thenk on him that thereonne gaf
His lif that wes so lef.
He it gaf for thee; thou yelde it him;
Agein his fo that staf thou nim
And wreke him of that thef.

Of righte bileve thou nim that sheld,
The whiles that thou best in that feld,
Thin hond to strengthen fonde;
And kep thy fo with staves ord,
And do that traitre seyen that word.
Biget that murie londe.

(31-48)⁷

The believer is a Knight, a "chaunpioun", and his "staf" is the Cross, his "sheld" is faith. This part is the most intensive which the poet wanted to show as the imperative mood, for example "Drey", "Up and be", "Stond, ne fall", "Thou tak the rode", "thou nim that sheld", are used here. These words show that the strong passionate faith moved the poet to write this poem. This faith can scarcely be seen in the Anglo-Saxon poems, especially in *The Wanderer*. Their strong and stern belief in Christianity makes the medieval poems stand out against the old poems. This strong belief makes this poem much more positive than *The Wanderer*,

where memory and sorrow haunt us all through the poem. Kane observes about this poem that the point of difference between this lyric and more naive moral versifying lies in the attitude of the author to his subject, which has excited his poetic imagination to the point where he himself has felt romantic sorrow.⁸ It is true that the romantic sorrow in the first three stanzas contributes greatly towards emphasizing the theme; the elaborateness of the poet lies in this contrasting the romantic sorrow of a mutability of the world with a passionate encouraging of faith, which is the theme of this poem. In addition to this, it is a very important point that for faith we must fight with the Devil and win it by ourselves, because a positive attitude to faith was the motivating power for spreading Christianity in the Middle Ages, and the shortest way to heaven. In Anglo-Saxon times most of the characters in lyric poems used to suffer misery by Fate, then they were to be exiled far away. The poets who composed such works must have tried to preach people that those sufferings were their only way to heaven. The fatalism of Anglo-Saxon poets can probably be seen everywhere, without excepting *The Wanderer*. In the Middle Ages, however, the poets did not suggest people that a cruel fate would bring sufferings to them but led them to willingly confront such misfortunes. Contrasted with a passive attitude of the Anglo-Saxon, a positive attitude toward their faith is notably insisted in the medieval literature.

II Gentle Christ

In medieval literature a lot of aspects of an object are seen. An examination of the attitude of medieval poets toward God or faith must make this clear. Justed below is a poem about Christ on the Cross that picks up other aspects of faith than the poem in chapter I. Woolf calls this poem "Passion meditation". Certainly through the poem a sorrowful

elegiac atmosphere floats so consistently that it gives to this poem much silent gracefulness. That is the effect of "meditation" style. In spite of its elegiac tone, the poem begins with the joy of spring time:

When I see blosmes springe
And here foules song,
A swete love-longinge
Min herte thourhout stong,
All for a love newe,
That is so swete and trewe,
That gladieth all my song;
Ich wot all mid iwisse
My joye and eke my blisse
On him is all ilong. (1-10)⁹

This verse identifies love for Jesus with the spring. It seems to be natural to believe in God's love as well as to enjoy the spring coming. Then the poet would say in this poem that his present living and happiness were caused by Christ's suffering on the Cross. In the first joyful verse he tried to emphasize the people's happiness in this world at the sacrifice of Jesus. Woolf thought this first verse so significant that she mentioned that "When y se blosmes springe" blends a spring love song and a meditation on the Passion sweetly and agreeably together.¹⁰ Her opinion must be true because this single joyful verse increases the sorrow of the subsequent stanzas conversely. Therefore the poet's technique of versification is similar to the poet's in chapter I. The second stanza to the last express the poet's attitude toward the Passion, as a beholder. Being different from the fighting knightly behaviour of the poet in chapter I, this poet pulls our heart-strings with sensitive weakness and mildness:

When I miselve stonde
And with min eyen seo
Thurled fot and honde
With grete naileds threo —
Bloody wes his heved;
On him nes nout bileved,
That wes of peines freo —

Well well oghte min herte
For his love to smerte
And sike and sory beo.

Jesu, milde and softe,
Gef me streinthe and might
Longen sore and ofte,
To lovie thee aright,
Pine to tholie and dreye
For thee, swete Marye;
Thou art so free and bright,
Maiden and moder milde:
For love of thine childe,
Ernde us hevене light.

Alas, that I ne con
Turne to him my thoght
And cheosen him to lemmon;
So duere he us hath iboght,
With woundes deope and stronge.
With peines sore and longe;
Of love ne conne we noght.
His blod that feol to grounde
Of his swete wounde
Of peine us hath iboght.

Jesu, milde and swete,
I singe thee my song;
Ofte I thee grete
And preye thee among;
Let me sunnes lete,
And in this live bete
That ich have so wrong;
At oure lives ende,
When we shule wende,
Jesu, us undefong! (11-50)¹¹

Like other meditative poems, this one also describes the Passion vividly and graphically. For instance, in the second stanza "Thurled fot and honde / With grete nailes threo — / Blody wes his heved;" makes us feel as if we are looking at the Crucifixion actually. Such vivid expression is used in Anglo-Saxon poems such as *The Dream of the Rood* which is also an elegiac poem. As for the treatment of Christ, his mildness is emphasized here; for example in the third and the fifth stanzas he is addressed as "mild and gentle", "mild and sweet". He is so gentle that he bought us with his wounds and pains and his blood to bring us to ehaven (This is written in the fourth stanza). Therefore he is a lover and saviour at the same time helping people who are so

weak. In the third stanza "Gef me streinthe and might / longen sore and ofte, / To lovie thee aright" and in the fifth stanza "Let me sunnes lete, / And in this live be / That ich have do wrong; . . . Jesu, us undefong!" show that the believer prays for help to keep the faith. Accordingly the poet seemed to reveal the weakness of the people and would say that we need absolutely Christ's help to protect ourselves from sins and we must be stronger remembering the Christ's sacrifice.

As we see the poem above, it is clear that a realistic expression impresses us much. The scene of Christ's Passion is depicted so visually in detail that hearers would feel as if they actually looked at the scene. This realism, which probably results from the poet's observational attitude toward the world of his work, are outstanding distinctions when we compare it with Anglo-Saxon styles, which generally have a subjective inclination.

III Humour in Riddle Poems

It seems probable that the sense of humour is a characteristic of medieval literature which rarely appears in Anglo-Saxon literature. Examining most Anglo-Saxon riddle poems which seem to be more humorous in their method than other categories, we cannot find any plausible examples which have even a little playfulness. The subjects which the Anglo-Saxon poems do not have playfulness they keep much wit especially in the riddles. Here we have an Anglo-Saxon riddle which seems to be humorous to a certain extent:

Ic pa wihte geseah; womb wæs on hindan
Pripum aprunten. Þegn flogade,
mægenrofa man, ond micel hæfde
gefered þæt hit felde, fleah purh his eage.
Ne swylte he symle, þonne syllan sceal
inna pam oprum, ac him eft cyme

bot in bosme, bæd bip aræred; 12
he sunu wyrce, bi him sylfa fæder.

This poem means probably a bellows. It is full of wit and the first four lines even show a little humour; however, the magnificent expression of the following four lines is doubtlessly characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon Period, so that the entire poem is not composed with playfulness. Then in respect to the medieval ones. A good example of a medieval riddle is the following:

A, dere God, what I am fayn,
For I am madyn now gane!

This enther day I mete a clerke,
And he was wily in his werke;
He prayd me with him to herke,
And his counsel all for to layne.

I trow he coud of gramery;
I shall now telle a good skill why:
For what I hade siccurly,
To warne his will had I no mayn.

Whan he nad me brout un us the schete,
Of all his will I him lete;
Now will not my girdil met —
A, dere God, what shall I sayn?

I shall sey to man and page
That I have bene of pilgrimage.
Now will I not lete for no rage 13
With me a clerk for to pleyn.

Even in the first two lines it is explicit that the subject of this poem is the sexual act, but the act is very ingeniously covered with suggestion. For example, the words "wily" and "layne" in the second stanza suggest not the literal meanin bul the lust of the cleric which is concealed skillfully. The most humourous representation appears in the fourth stanza "now will not my girdil me — / A, dere God, what shall I sayn?". Of course it means that as she is pregnant her belly swells. Such playful poems as this were probably composed in rebellion against the sermon or poems translated from the Latin,

and such were one of the pleasures of the common people. The girl of this poem may be a peasant. It means that the poets' interests of the time were inclining to the lives of the ordinary people as contrasted with the Anglo-Saxon poets who like to treat the world of kings and nobles as their subjects. At the same time the mockery of a cleric appears in this poem. The last stanza teaches us that even such a free attitude toward religion was allowed in composing. The comparison of a pilgrimage with the sexual act is so bold and witty that the sense of humour of the poet is no less than that of modern poets.

Conclusion

One of many differences between Anglo-Saxon lyrics and medieval ones may be that the latter are written from several points of view. In the Anglo-Saxon times people might have been interested mostly in the lives of kings and nobles, preferring those aristocratic literature or saints' stories to vulgar ones. Such Anglo-Saxon poetry certainly has so many elaborations in their wit or style that we can simply pick up with much interests their magnificent images: for example, ocean, ruins, transient world. On the contrary, medieval lyrics are full of humours and playfulness coming from the common people's world. As we read such witful medieval poems we can touch power of the lives of medieval people who favoured wit and playfulness. Middle-English poets enlarged the range of the objects or the materials to the point that they could draw much attentions even of the commons, while stylistically maintaining Anglo-Saxon literature.

NOTES

1. Maxwell S. Luria and Richard L. Hoffman, eds., *Middle English Lyrics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974). Subsequent citations are to this edition with page numbers given in the text.
2. Luria, p.12.
3. John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry* (London: Faber, 1957), p.90.
4. T. P. Dunning & A. J. Bliss, eds., *The Wanderer* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1978), p.121.
5. I am indebted to Dr. Skey for pointing out this important similarity in the arrangement of subjects.
6. Luria, p.12.
7. Luria, pp.12-13.
8. George Kane, *Middle English Literature* (London: n.p., 1951).
9. Luria, p.107.
10. Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in The Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p.64.
11. Luria, p.107.
12. G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book in The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (New York: Columbia U. P., 1936, rpt. n.d.), pp. 198-9, Riddle 37.
13. Luria, p.82.

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