An Annotated Bibliography of the Middle English Lyric

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Abstract

The thesis surveys editions and criticism of the Middle English lyric, emphasizing works of the twentieth century. The annotations are arranged in chronological order, to display the scope and course of criticism. The general introduction discusses critical trends and aspects of the genre.

The term 'Middle English lyric' raises problems of definition, since the poems are varied, and some are not lyrical by the standards of other times and languages. The collections of lyrics illustrate the need for a more precise term. Critical preoccupations have changed little during the century, although some methods differ. Psychological, gender, and cultural studies allow further insights into the lyrics and their purposes, by treating the poems as evidence of traits and trends.

The isolable lyrics and lyrics of mundane life are of particular interest. The isolable lyrics are parts of larger works that function discretely, to be extracted and used by poets who did not compose them. They differ from the sections of medieval drama which some twentieth-century critics have identified as isolable. The mundane lyrics, short poems that transmit and enforce the knowledge and values of medieval society, reveal much of that society. Although many of these poems are not lyrical, they are of interest in their own right, and are included in collections with others that more closely answer criteria of the lyric.

Study of the lyrics and their criticism reveals the poems' relationship to their predecessors in other languages and their cultural significance; it also suggests the scope and methods of further study. The thesis concludes with indexes of scholars and critics, subjects discussed, first lines of poems listed in the Index of Middle English Verse and its Supplement, and a temporary index of poems not noted in either.