



What is the significance of seasonal imagery in the Middle English lyric?

Charlotte Palmer

The abundant lushness of spring or the beating winds of winter and other seasonal images are not uncommon in the Middle English lyric, the elemental forces or natural impact taking up firm residence in lyrical tropes. Sometimes the superficial associations and images of death and rebirth are so easily recognisable that it is simple to overlook other potential interpretations; I argue, however, that the use of seasonal imagery can reveal a web of contextual meaning, and its use in Middle English lyrics aids a sense of movement within them. This is shown in two ways: on a symbolic level the cyclical nature of the seasons is mimicked in lyric structures and characters; on a more contextual level the use of seasonal imagery can demonstrate the fluidity of movement and influence between religious and secular lyrics. These may appear to be two rather different ideas but they come from different directions to work in harmony and help further understanding of contemporary lifestyle and belief. I aim to demonstrate, through the lyric culture, the deep influence and infiltration of the church on everyday life, and that attempts to separate and categorise religious and secular lyrics is reductive of their reciprocal nature.

Duncan believes that separating and categorising religious and secular lyrics is the easiest and best introduction to them, and whilst it may be the easiest, it is not necessarily the best, and only in layering lyrics can one get a true sense of their borrowed meanings and origins and thus any wider applicable significance.¹ Trying to strictly categorise these lyrics is like prising apart two glued objects, difficult and each leaving the other residually incomplete and destabilised. Duncan did, however, note the 'common currency of word and phrase' and there is certainly a sense of the trade of images, particularly those related to the seasons which had both religious and secular applications.² This, therefore, partially becomes a social study, using the images and ideas of literary culture to draw conclusions about the social lifestyle and beliefs of the contemporary reader or poet. For the purposes of exploring any themes in detail I wish to focus closely on four lyrics: Dunbar's 'A Meditation in Winter,' and the Harley MS. 2253, 'Lenten ys come with love to tounne,' 'When Y se blosmes springe,' and 'Wynter wakeneth al my care.' Whilst Dunbar's lyric may seem different from the otherwise solely Harley-based study its abundance of seasonal description is too rich to forego.

The prominence of the Harley lyrics in my argument becomes an example in itself. Commonly believed to be compiled between 1314-1325 (much earlier than Dunbar's, written during the reign of James IV) the manuscript has been described by Wenzel as a 'helter-skelter' in its mix of the religious and secular, Latinate and vernacular.³ In this example of manuscript culture, it is easy to see how images were allowed free interchange, an image once used for religious explanation being seen side by side and understood in a lyric with a more secular origin. In this context lyrics gain stability from one another and show the fluidity between genres. One of the key bridges between the religious and the secular is the notion of affective piety, the presentation of Christ as human with human emotions to elicit human responses of compassion and devotion. McNamer, in her study on affective piety in literature, stresses the focus on the reaction of the reader, and the immediate human emotion to which

¹ Thomas G. Duncan, *Companion to the Middle English Lyric* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), p.xxv.

² Duncan, *Companion*, p.xxi

³ Siegfried Wenzel, *Preachers, poets and the early English lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.5.

one could relate.⁴ In an agrarian society more dependent on the seasons than today's, this is evident in many of the lyrics I explore. It is therefore not surprising that the link between seasonal and human disposition is embedded. There is an activeness in the lyrics that allows us to feel the significance of the seasons to medieval English life and helps explain its frequent use as such powerful image in the contemporary lyrics. The seasons as exemplifying movement, both religious and cyclical, is best seen by examining the role of personified, gendered and active seasons, seasonal openings to lyrics and the seasonal as divine.

Many lyrics make a physical link between the seasons and the narrator's mood, be this of joy or woe. Brook talks about the Middle English poet's 'responsiveness' to the seasons, visualising medieval man's reliance on and total surrender to seasonal whim.⁵ Many of the lyrics, however, reflect this responsiveness and dependency by personifying the seasons, implying their almost physical presence in the lyric. In some lyrics this is done to vilify the seasonal influence. For example, in 'Wynter wakeneth al my care,' (editorial title and l,1) the first line becomes accusatory, winter almost malicious in its active awakening of the narrator's passive sorrow.⁶ Similarly, in Dunbar's 'A Meditation in Winter' there are embedded formal examples of this inherent link between season and narrator, perhaps in an even more explicit manner. Lists of three are used to describe both winter and the narrator's condition, the initial description of winter echoing in the narrator's woe. 'With mystie vapouris, cluddis, and skyis' (l.3) is reflected in 'I walk, I turne, sleip may I nocht'(l.11).⁷ These rhythmic similarities create an inherent pattern which is perhaps stylistically associating man's temperament with the elemental and seasonal climate. There is an oppressive claustrophobia in the vapours and clouds which can also be seen in the discontented movements of the turning and lack of sleep. Even in the description of winter as first chronologically suggests that it is the proactive leading of winter which results in the narrator's woeful disposition, and there is therefore an inherent link between narrator and season.

These personified seasons are also sometimes gendered, or adopt gendered traits borrowed from other literary traditions. Again, Dunbar's 'A Meditation in Winter' says his creative ailments are due to a 'laik of Symmer with his flouris' (l.10) This suggests that summer is like a remedy, but the masculine personification may align this more with a heroic male figure. The beckoning of 'Cum, lustie Symmer,' (l.49) also adds to the creation of an active, masculine figure. The Middle English Dictionary (MED) suggests many potential definitions for 'lustie,' but all revolve around something handsome and vigorous, the example given being that of a 'lusti man.'⁸ These associations could perhaps play into the chivalric narratives where the masculine hero intercepts danger to save a feminine object of desire. If seasons take on these meanings then it allows us to delve further into the gendered roles within the lyric, and wider power dynamics of literary narratives. Chivalric tropes, if applied in this way, would suggest the narrator to be feminine, in her appeal to be aided by summer's fruitfulness. This characterisation of a masculine summer thus takes on an active role, his entrance described as directly and actively removing winter, a push-pull dynamic not often considered with relation to the seasons which are more often seen as inevitably cyclical. This builds throughout Dunbar's lyric to portray a summer so strongly personified in his active role within the narrative structure that he almost exceeds the human realm, surpassing the power of the narrative voice. Another definition offered by the MED for 'lustie' suggested a benevolent, divine will,

⁴ Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 2010), p.1.

⁵ G.L.Brook ed., *The Harley Lyrics, the Middle English lyrics of MS Harley 2253* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), p.25.

⁶ 'Wynter wakeneth al my care,' ed. Brook, *Harley*, p.53 (which all future references refer to).

⁷ William Dunbar, 'A Meditation in Winter,' <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/conlee-dunbar-complete-works-poems-devotional-and-moral> [accessed 04-05-2018], (which all future references refer to).

⁸ 'Lustie,' adj. MED, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED26382> [accessed 04-05-2018].

and the narrator's calling upon summer has an air of the divine.⁹ This impingement of the religious onto what is commonly read as a secular meditation demonstrates the ease of movement from religious to secular based on interpretation. Arguably, it is not too far-fetched to read the beyond-human might aided by the chivalric tropes as working in unison with the religious images of God's will, embodied in the seasonal imagery. The seasons here appear powerful, beyond human control. The religious elements also emphasise the relative helplessness of the narrator. In looking at multiple interpretations, as I have done here, it demonstrates the versatility of the Middle English lyric and its active and 'malleable' possibilities which awaited readers of the material, and highlights the importance of individual interpretation.¹⁰

Although not irrefutable definitions, as I will later discuss, if summer is masculine then spring, and its associations with fertility and renewal, is often feminised. 'Lenten ys come with love to toune,' regularly described as one of the most vibrant descriptions of spring surviving in lyric poetry, offers a powerful evocation of spring's arrival: the rose becomes rosier, and the moon shines brighter, both using the feminine possessive pronoun 'hire' (l.13-16).¹¹ The feminine preening attributed to these seasonal components may conform to courtly poetry, whereby the women of desire are commonly described in terms of their lavish beauty through metaphor. Brook agrees that many of the secular Harley lyrics were 'written under the influence' of courtly conventions.¹² The feminine presentation of spring, therefore, influences the wider narrative implications of the lyric, and, unlike 'A Meditation in Winter,' the narrator takes on a masculine persona, with the agency to gaze upon the physical beauty of spring.

However, there is a degree of activity given to Dunbar's narrator, albeit a trudging movement. The 'into' which opens the lyric ('Into thir dirk and drublie dayis'(l.1)) creates the impression of reluctantly moving toward the enveloping gloom. The hesitation is emphasised in the alliteration of 'dirk,' 'drublie' and 'dayis,' the plosive sounds jarring the movement and not allowing any harmonious rhythm to the lyric's initial tone. The unwilling movement of narrator into seasonal space runs in opposition to 'Lenten ys come with love to toune,' in which spring, the active member here, bursts into the frame of the lyric, love in tow. This sense of a proactive spring may appear to run in contradiction to my previous distinction between an active, male summer and a feminine, passive spring, but I feel it important to admit to contradictions. It is in this interpretation of personified seasons that I think the flexibility of the imagery becomes most apparent, and whilst there were huge influences across the lyrical and contextual tradition, this has been harnessed and interpreted to very different ends within the framework of individual lyrics. And in this context, the lushness and vitality of spring is overwhelmingly active.

Images of springtime are frequently used to open Middle English lyrics, the lush renewal and rebirth lending great optimism to many of the opening lines. Whilst some lyrics retain these seasonal themes throughout, often they are used to create a rich opening and introduce some broader themes before the lyric moves away to other ideas. This is seen in both religious and secular lyrics, and Brook implies that the influence of seasonal openings works in a secular to religious direction of influence, the 'phraseology of love lyrics' being mimicked in affective meditations.¹³ Despite strong cyclical movements involved in the use of the seasons the departure after a spring opening can signify a more linear progression and meditation. For example, 'When Y se blosmes springe' has a remarkably similar opening to 'Lenten ys come with love to toune' with its density of images and the lush rejuvenation of spring. They also both comment on the beauty of the birdsong, but where 'Lenten' remains

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ McNamer, *Affective meditation*, p.19.

¹¹ 'Lenten ys come with love to toune,' ed. Brook, *Harley*, p.43-44 (which all future references refer to).

¹² Brook, *Harley*, p.6.

¹³ Brook, *Harley*, p.16.

literal, the whole of the first stanza accumulating a wall of sound until the 'wode ryngeth' ('12), 'When Y se blosmes springe' begins with birdsong and a sweet love longing, reminiscent of another love which gladdens the narrator's own song, revealed in the second stanza to be a devotional love for Christ.¹⁴

Opening with spring imagery, as well as being implied to be inherently linked to the narrator's disposition, could also stabilise the emotions affective piety was intended to arouse. Similarly to how affective meditation aims to lower religion from an incomprehensible level, the joy of spring can stir familiar emotions in the reader to set the prevailing tone when moving into the religious themes. It seems very natural to describe what one sees and the emotions this evokes regarding the spring imagery: 'when y se blosmes springe,' 'that gladieth al my song' (l.1, l.7). The use of this opening stanza and the very earthly and accessible images of spring therefore set a grounding from which the continued lyric 'I' can move into the biblical realm with the same relational understanding. The intended inhabitant of the Middle English lyrical 'I' has long been contested, but Woolf argues that it acted as instruction for 'Everyman,' especially in the religious lyric.¹⁵ Therefore, the seasonal imagery, coupled with the inclusion encouraged by the lyrical 'I', could ease the transition from secular seasonal to religious devotion, a copying of trigger and elicited reaction. The seasonal opening aids the instructional tone, the joy one is supposed to feel being echoed in the joy one should feel at Christ's love.

A more pessimistic seasonal opening can be found in 'Wynter wakeneth al my care,' the desolate images of winter acting as a springboard for the following ideas and prevailing tone throughout the lyric. Line by line there is a degeneration from seasonal into personal misery. The first line attributes winter as being directly responsible for the narrator's sadness, before physically comparing this to a symptom of winter, the 'leves [which] waxeth bare' (l.2). The description of winter ceases here and the lyric then becomes far more introspective: a personal meditation on the finite span of life. Winter imagery similarly opens Dunbar's 'A Meditation in Winter,' but he also uses images of summer to close his meditation, a seasonal bookending. The opening two stanzas are packed with dismal images of winter, ominous in its bleakness, both in terms of weather and the narrator's temperament. The middle section of Dunbar's lyric takes the form of a *Romance of the Rose*-like encounter with allegorical characters, such as Patience, Prudence and Age, before returning to the seasonal imagery by appealing to summer. In doing this there is a cyclical nature to the structure, winter departing and summer taking its place by the end with the resultant hopefulness. This sense of hope is not echoed in the religious end to 'Wynter wakeneth al my care.' The cyclical resolution of Dunbar's lyric contributes to the hope we glimpse at the end and the absence of this in 'Wynter wakeneth al my care' causes the ending to feel suspended and unresolved, similar to the image of purgatory it ends on: 'For Y not whider I shal, | Ne hou longe her duelle' (l.17-18). This suggests that the turning of the seasons could be mirrored in the very structure of the lyrics. Where the natural progression is adhered to, the promise of summer's joys is implied and the lyric ends optimistically, but the dwelling on winter and the stagnation of the seasonal cycle destabilises the narrator's disposition for the rest of the lyric, symbolised in the hanging statement of uncertainty of the final line.

Until this point the focus of the essay has primarily been the influence of the secular on religious imagery, but this is a flexible relationship and there is certainly evidence to suggest a mutual sharing of images and patterns. Wenzel highlighted the key role interpretation played in the Middle English lyric, noting that whatever their original purpose, many lyrics were given religious meanings, especially in sermons and official religious teachings. In this vein, I want to re-examine 'Lenten ys come with love to toun' through the lens of its potentially religious connotations. The MED defines 'lenten' as both spring and referring to Lent, the very core of language demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between religious and secular, resurrection

¹⁴ 'When y se blosmes springe,' ed. Brook, *Harley*, p.54 (which all future references refer to)

¹⁵ Rosemary Woolf, *The English religious lyric in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p.6 and p.14 respectively.

and renewal.¹⁶ The lyric's language is devoted to a wonderful portrayal of nature, at the point of spring bursting and the natural world coming, once again, to life. This lushness is only minorly interrupted with the revelation in the final three lines of the last two stanzas that the narrator is unlucky in love, that they are 'on of tho | For love that likes ille,' (l.23-24) concluding that in the event of being love lacking he shall 'whyt in wode be fleme' (l.36). There is a tinge of sadness to this but it does not overwhelm the poem, only ending it, with a fizzle more than a bang. The final stanza is filled with pairings of natural images or creatures, the moon and the sun, the dew and the grass and implications of sex or desire, the bizarre image of worms making love underground. The final stanza ends with the statement seemingly irrelevant to the previous themes, 'Yef me shal wonte wile of on, This wunne weole Y wole forgon Ant wyht in wode be fleme' (l.34-36). Although there is certainly disappointment in missing out on this wonderful richness of love, the sentiment is not described with the intense descriptors found in the rest of the lyric. I find it strange, then, that the narrator's solution to this love woe is to exile himself into the woods, which houses much of the nature he has spent the past three stanzas discussing with wonderment.

I think here a religious reading could be made. The natural elements of spring seem all consuming and unavoidable in their abundance, and the absence of an earthly love is viewed lightly. This could imply an underlying highlighting of the rejection of earthly love in favour of the richness of an ever-present and larger God's love. That the narrator ends the lyric with an image of entering the woods could reiterate an acceptance of God's love and the abundance which that brings in the face of earthly rejection. The term 'fleme' could also connote biblical exile. The earliest incidence of exile found in the Bible is that of Adam and Eve, and the poet's rich description of spring is almost Eden-like in its lushness. Based, therefore, on interpretation, the use of seasonal imagery helped the cross-fertilisation of images, and the seasonal richness of spring is a fertile bed from which to grow and interweave other images of the sublime, such as the all-encompassing nature of God's love. Although this does not come under the umbrella of affective piety, there is resonance of it in the use of religious metaphor based in earthly love and seasonal fertility. There is not the same equality between man and Christ as seen in 'When Y se blosmes springe,' a natural hierarchy still imposed, but we still find the use of understandable emotions within the secular imagery to transpose onto or help further the religious implications and meanings.

Seasonal imagery adds a dynamism to the lyrics it pertains to, either by acknowledging the season's cyclical nature or using it as a vehicle to transport ideas across thematic boundaries. Above all else, this study has demonstrated to me the importance and versatility of interpretation. I hope to have established just what active and important roles the seasons play in lyrical interpretation, and the plethora of ways in which this movement is shown. Seasonal imagery has strata of meanings within the medieval lyric. The use of personified seasons allows them to act as characters in the lyrics, a solidity of place, paradoxically, allowing them more agency and flexibility within the lyrical framework. By starting with seasonal imagery the lyric gains stability and meaning from it before moving outwards. The understandable reactions to the seasons, helped by the lyrical 'I' guides a reader's emotional response to the further images and ideas introduced, particularly with regards to affective piety. On a contextual level, seasonal imagery demonstrates the fluidity between religious and secular culture and tropes, and the sharing of themes and the importance of interpretation. The importance of personal interpretation has made this a tricky study to anchor, but I do not think it's importance to the Middle English lyric culture should be overlooked. Even if the season's impact and role is not a hugely visible one it layers meanings and contextual associations which can only aid the richness of interpretation to be found in Middle English lyrics.

¹⁶ 'Lenten,' n. MED, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED25141> [accessed 04-05-2018].

Bibliography

Brook, G.L., ed., *The Harley Lyrics, the Middle English lyrics of MS Harley 2253* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968).

Dunbar, William and John Conlee, ed., "Poems Devotional and Moral," *TEAMS Middle English Text Series*, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/conlee-dunbar-complete-works-poems-devotional-and-moral> [accessed 07-08-2018].

Duncan, Thomas G., *Companion to the Middle English Lyric* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2005).

Ferguson, Arthur B., *The Chivalric Tradition in Renaissance England*, (London, Associate University Presses, 1986).

Gray, Douglas, *Themes and images in the medieval English lyric* (London: Routledge, 1972).

McNamer, Sarah, *Affective meditation and the invention of medieval compassion* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

"Middle English Dictionary, Lookups." <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/lookup.html> [accessed 07-05-2018].

Nelson, Ingrid, *Lyric Tactics: poetry, genre and practice in later medieval England* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

Wenzel, Siegfried, *Preachers, poets and the early English lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

Wolf, Rosemary, *The English religious lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).