Form, Time, and the "First English Sonnet"

Abstract

The earliest known English poem rhyming *ababcdcdefefgg* appears within John Metham's 1448/9 romance *Amoryus and Cleopes*. However, scholarship cannot easily claim Metham's lyric as "the first English sonnet": contrary to past suggestions, available historical and manuscript evidence indicates that he did not intentionally create it as a sonnet, but rather composed in the form accidentally. This inset lyric's rhyme scheme therefore represents, possibly uniquely in English, sonnet form without the sonnet tradition. Despite this isolation, however, attentive reading shows that the lyric achieves certain effects very like those produced by later English sonnets. The common features underpinning these effects even in a text not knowingly written as a sonnet might help criticism isolate factors which constitute form's essence or quiddity.

The first known English poem in fourteen lines end-rhyming *ababcdcdefefgg* dates to 1448 or 1449. It is a lyric set within John Metham's romance *Amoryus and Cleopes*.[1] We associate these formal criteria with the sonnet. Moreover, the specific rhyme scheme chosen by Metham matches the classic "English" or "Shakespearean" arrangement: if this is a sonnet, it is the first known English example in two ways. However, no known genealogical link ties this lyric to the sixteenth-century sonnet tradition. It sits incongruously inside the fifteenth century and outside literary history. *Amoryus and Cleopes* is rarely read, and few scholars have considered Metham's lyric. Although Stephen Page first discussed its existence and rhyme scheme at the end of the last century, it has received little attention from Middle

English specialists, and next to no recognition from scholarship on the sonnet.[2] As Elizabeth Robertson remarks, "it is extraordinary that this first version of a sonnet is so rarely commented upon in histories of the development of the sonnet form"—or, I would add, almost anywhere else.[3] Gordon Braden does concessively note it in his contribution to *A Companion to Renaissance Poetry*—a collection with a title asserting the period divide troubled by Metham's work—but, on the other hand, *Amoryus and Cleopes* goes unmentioned when Stephen Regan discusses the beginnings of the English sonnet in his recent, invigorating monograph on the form.[4] Regan hails the introduction of the *ababcdcdefefgg* rhyme scheme by the sadly truncated Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey as an "inspired decision."[5] Metham's inset lyric shows that inspiration could strike in the fifteenth century too.

None of the standard indexes of Middle English verse list this lyric, since they exclude inset texts. This case is not unique: an epistolary poem surviving in the early sixteenth-century "Welles Anthology" has understandably been indexed as a twenty-two-line text, but is made up of a fourteen-line *aabcbcdedeffgg* letter-lyric, followed by an *ababbcbc* octet *envoi* (the *envoi* having been lifted wholesale from Lydgate).[6] Amanda Holton has adeptly explored various fourteen-line English lyrics preceding and anticipating the sixteenth-century sonnet, showing the normality of English poems in fourteen lines before the first sonneteers, but even her examination omits Metham's lyric, presumably because of its absence from indexes.[7] Although the fourteen-line lyrics Holton examines, attending particularly to Charles d'Orléans, certainly do make up part of the prehistory of the English sonnet, none of them deliver an identifiable sonnet rhyme-scheme. By skipping Metham's *ababcdcdefefgg* lyric, her otherwise excellent study fails to call what might have been its strongest witness, and leaves Metham obscured even within what she justly calls an "obscured tradition."

Due to all this nescience, no one has thought through the problem which Metham's poem poses for our understanding of form. This lyric is form outside tradition. It offers a rare chance to think more acutely about traditional firsts. Of all English verse forms, the sonnet is perhaps the most recognizable, the most mythologized, and the most tightly bound up with the separation of "medieval" from "renaissance." Metham's lyric fulfils the formal requirements of this high-prestige form, but inhabits a particularly little-examined example of a generally low-prestige body of work, Middle English romance. Students of the early-modern sonnet in English do not, by and large, read Middle English romances, even though many such romances circulated in print and manuscript through the sixteenth century and continued to influence at least some poets.[8] Romance experts have, meanwhile, often defensively pitched their specialism as the investigation of popular literature for authentic evidence of past culture (more authentic evidence, it is usually implied, than that offered by Chaucer and the Chaucerians).[9] This approach has produced much vital research, but it has also tended to route attention away from verse romances as verse.[10] For several compounding reasons, then, scholarship currently lacks both a detailed exploration of Metham's lyric, and a consideration of the literary-critical problem it raises: can a poem which meets the formal criteria of a sonnet *be* a sonnet when it lacks genealogical links to a sonnet tradition, and when it is unlikely to have been regarded as a sonnet in its own time?

The following discussion attempts two tasks. First, a rounded study of the literary-historical problem presented by the lyric. The brief past treatments of this lyric have been content to call it a sonnet and move on, but this must change, for good historical reasons. The lyric was probably neither written nor read as a sonnet. It would have initially been received as only one among several experimental bravura passages in Metham's poem, rather than as an exceptional innovation. I treat these matters at some length because they seem to me to be timely, and because to ignore them would be unfair to Metham, who deserves to be read as a

poet with a context like any other poet, rather than as someone hermetically sealed away from the canon. Second, the discussion attempts a detailed study of the lyric itself, the first careful reading of the poem, something which is in itself a *desideratum* for the field: we surely cannot let the first known English appearance of the *ababcdcdefefgg* rhyme scheme languish unread. This reading shows that, even though Metham's lyric was probably neither written nor received as a sonnet, its formal effects closely resemble those we associate with sonnets. Ironically, we can only sense some of these effects by ceasing to think of the lyric through a sonnet template. As I argue in detail below, coming to the lyric with such a template in hand obstructs the appreciation of Metham's real sonnet-like poetic achievement. This is why the close reading follows the contextualization, rather than preceding it: the lyric can only be read accurately once some assumptions have been unpicked.

Three conclusions emerge, two of them narrower in scope, the third one a significant broader implication. First, John Metham deserves more attention as an inventive fifteenth-century writer, and the verse of verse romance in general deserves close attention as verse. Second, not all the formal innovations in sixteenth-century English writing were locally unprecedented; this point is hardly new, but it bears repetition.[11] Third, and more broadly, there are aspects of form which are untouched by contextualization or by prior knowledge. To say this is not to deprecate literary history, and I do not set out here to pit history and form fruitlessly against each other. Only careful thought about this lyric's context can enable a fuller appreciation of the formal effects found in the lyric itself. However, once that careful thought has cleared the way, the lyric becomes a rare chance to see which aspects of the "English" sonnet form persist when the cultural baggage carried by the concept of the sonnet disappears.

The lyric

Within *Amoryus and Cleopes* itself, Metham says he wrote during "the sevyn and twenty yere of the sext Kyng Henry," that is, between 1 September 1448 and 31 August 1449, for Katherine de la Pole (d.1488) and Miles Stapleton (d.1466); this is the only surviving Middle English romance with a woman as (co-)dedicatee (2115–77).[12] Metham probably wrote in Norfolk, and might have had some portion of a university education from Cambridge, though he is not a recorded graduate.[13] The poem survives in one copy, in a hand of the second half of the fifteenth century.[14] Other evidence probably narrows the book's production down to 1461–8.[15] The romance runs to 2,222 lines in its most recent edition, and consists mostly, but not only, of rhyme royal stanzas. The lyric appears about 400 lines in, when the knightly protagonist Amoryus is travelling with his father, Palamedon, and a group of fellow "yonge knytys" (403) during the month of May.[16] One of the group teasingly suggests that Amoryus' serious countenance results from recent ill-luck in love (355–68), and Amoryus denies ever having been in love (369–75). Seemingly to dispel the rather sober mood, Amoryus' interlocutor then calls over four more knights, and together they sing the following song.[17]

> **Q**wan flourys sprede in May, of monthyz myryest,   [f. 24ʳ, l. 1]
>
> And euery byrde hath chosyn hys louely make,
>
> For joye of þe sesun amonge þe leuys grene gan rest,
>
> Wyth myry notys syngyng, as I my walkyng gan take,
>
> Vndyr a forest syde, I herd one, for hys ladyiz sake   385
>
> To þe goddes of loue he gan to compleyn,
>
> And eke to Fortune, for los of hys lady souereyn:
>
> "**O**, Fortune! Alas! Qwy arte þow to me onkend?
>
> Qwy chongyddyst þow thi qwele causeles?

Qwy art þow myne enmye and noȝt my frend,   390

And I euer þi seruant in al maner of loulynes?

But nowe of my lyfe, my comfort, and my afyaunz

Thowe hast me beraft; þat causyth me þus to compleyn:

O, bryghter þan Phebus! O lyly! O grownd of plesaunz!

O rose of beauté! O most goodely, sumtyme my lady souereyn!   395

But O, allas! þat þru summe enmye or sum suspycyus coniecte,

I throwyn am asyde and owte of my ladiis grace,

Sumtyme in fauer, but now fro alle creaturys abiecte,

As oftyn sqwowny[n]g as I remembyr her bryght face.

But now adwe foreuer, for my ful felycyté   400

Is among þise grene leuys for to be.”

(381–401)

Thus, though I have been calling the lyric “inset,” it is in fact doubly inset, preceded within

the song of Amoryus’ companions by its own single-stanza frame narrative of overheard

complaint. Jenni Nuttall aptly places the lyric as a “complaint within a frame within a song . .

. inset into a narrative poem.”[18] The frame’s resemblance to the eavesdropping situation in

The Book of the Duchess might be intentional, and there is at least one lexical echo: the

“forest syde” was a standard phrase in Middle English (385), but it is also where the dreamer

of the *Book* winds up shortly before he is led to the Man in Black.[19] Though Metham does

vary stanza length and rhyme scheme in places, a habit which I discuss in more detail below,

the most recent forty-eight stanzas before the lyric proper follow the orthodox rhyme royal

pattern of *ababbcc*, with just one exception, an isolated couplet twenty stanzas earlier (246–

7).[20] The three quatrains and closing couplet of the lyric proper would therefore have stood

out as an aurally distinct variation, fully borne home to the audience when the fifth line of the lyric refuses the third *-nes* rhyme which would be expected in rhyme royal (392).

Readers with an ear for Middle English verse might, at this point, have raised their eyebrows at the lyric's meter. The poem shares the meter of the romance as a whole, which has drawn unfavorable comment.[21] Nicholas Myklebust has recently rehabilitated it, however, and the topic demands a brief excursus here, because it influences the lyric's classification—"Fourteen *good measur'd* verses make a sonnet"—and because it provides the strongest single piece of evidence that the lyric is Metham's work, no other poet having been found writing verse to the same rhythms.[22] Myklebust shows via an extended statistical study that although Metham's lines vary significantly in length, they nevertheless obey three observable rules:

1. two beats cannot be adjacent;
2. two beats can be separated by either one offbeat or a pair of adjacent offbeats; and
3. a line can contain zero, one, or two pairs of adjacent offbeats, but no more than two.

Myklebust also suggests that Metham patterns the lengths of lines to build up passages of relative predictability, sometimes punctured by sudden line-length variation for surprise and emphasis.[23] Metham might be the most metrically experimental later Middle English poet, and the effect can be strange and even off-putting to readers accustomed to his contemporaries. However, his work proceeds according to an observable system and, however challenging its meter might be to some modern tastes, his lyric is, by his own standards, "good measur'd."

An accidental form

Past mentions of Metham's lyric have treated it uncomplicatedly as a sonnet, but the poet probably did not intend to write a sonnet, and his readers probably would not have recognized one, for several reasons. First, neither Metham nor his readers would have regarded a fourteen-line lyric as a distinctive oddity. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writers in England were entirely comfortable working at roughly the length of a sonnet. One set of poems share a thirteen-line stanza, which often achieved considerable beauty.[24] The thirteen-line stanza had a *frons* of eight lines followed by a metrically distinct *cauda* delivering a tying-off effect not wholly unlike that of a sestet.[25] A small but notable group used a related fourteen-line arrangement in which the *cauda* reached the six-line extent of the Petrarchan sonnet's sestet.[26] Several types of twelve-line stanza with a concluding shift in rhyme pattern in the final four lines also saw use.[27] Scholarship long ago drew an analogy between the concluding quatrain of the twelve-line stanza in *Pearl*, beginning with a shift in rhyme which often coordinates with a syntactic break, and the Petrarchan sonnet's sestet.[28] Sustained writing in stanzas in English was hardly unfamiliar with units of this type.

Patterns used for free-standing short poems provide analogues which are closer still. As three among the elegant poems uniquely preserved in the "Findern Manuscript" remind us, two rhyme royal stanzas make a fourteen-line lyric.[29] Given its narrative context of group singing and its three quatrains, the idea of the carol might haunt Metham's lyric: the closing couplet of the preceding rhyme royal frame stanza could be taken as an unfulfilled burden (386–7), with its rhyme recalled within the lyric (393, 395). The roundel offered a different model at roughly the same length; one English example, "Merciles Beaute," was attributed to Chaucer, albeit perhaps shakily, and Jenni Nuttall has recently shown how, in England about two decades before *Amoryus and Cleopes*, this form was rare, but prestigious when encountered.[30] Nutall has also explored the fifteenth-century persistence of influence in

England from the French lineage of *complaintes* inserted into larger narratives and defined, loosely, more by subject than by form; these resemble Metham's lyric in tone and purpose.[31] And, of course, Holton's work on fourteen-line Middle English lyrics shows how Metham and his audience could have encountered poems which anticipated the sonnet.

The word *sonet* had been used in English at this point, but seemingly with the general sense of a pleasant song: when, in *Cleanness*, Belshazzar and his guests profane the Temple vessels (Daniel 5: 2–4), the poet writes that "Clatering of couaclez þat kesten þo burdes / As sonet out of sauteray song als myry;" and in a fifteenth-century English rendering of the tale of Anselmus from the Anglo-Latin branch of the *Gesta Romanorum* tradition a nightingale makes "a passing swete sonet-song."[32] With only two examples known to dictionaries, both led by alliteration—obligatory alliteration, in the *Pearl*-poet's case—the word was perhaps an occasional ornamental borrowing from French, where it had a similarly broad sense, rather than part of a normal Middle English active vocabulary. Metham and his readers might have had reason to call this lyric a *sonet*, but no evidence suggests that they would have had the concept of a sonnet with its particular templates for rhyme schemes.

It seems unlikely that Metham and his audience knew the Italian sonnet tradition. Relatively few people in England read Italian literature directly in this period: Chaucer was an exception, and John Lydgate and Thomas Hoccleve, for example, were not Italianists. True, England was hardly cut off from Italy in the fifteenth century.[33] True, Petrarch himself had an established reception in England by the middle of the fifteenth century, and, true, some Petrarch manuscripts had settled in Cambridge for good early in the century, and, true, Metham claims a Cambridge education in his prose works.[34] However, England received Petrarch as a Latin author, not an Italian poet, and the known Cambridge copies transmitted the Latin Petrarch, not the Italian.[35] Chaucer adapted Petrarch's Sonnet 132, of course, but he rendered it into a lyric occupying twenty-one lines rather than fourteen, and into something

expansive or, less kindly, "often puffy."[36] Chaucer chose this route, rather than succumbing to some kind of force for consistency exerted by the surrounding verse: he could vary established rhyme schemes elsewhere, even switching from stichic to stanzaic at one point in *The Book of the Duchess*.[37] The French sonnet, meanwhile, emerged in the sixteenth century and so cannot have transferred the concept to Metham. I do not say with certainty that Metham never accessed Italian verse. It merely seems improbable that he both accessed Italian verse and found an audience capable of recognizing that formal inheritance.

Metham's particular choice of rhyme scheme itself makes it less likely that this lyric intentionally echoed pre-existing sonnets, or that his audience recognized the sonnet form in it. Any fifteenth-century reader would have struggled to relate Metham's lyric to the sonnet tradition as it existed at the time, because the lyric lacks an Italianate octave–sestet pattern of rhyme. Even Nicolò de' Rossi (d. *c.* 1350), who, unusually, adopted a closing couplet on a new rhyme sound in the majority of his sonnet sestets, did not break with the octave.[38] The "English" rhyme scheme of *ababcdcdefefgg* could only become a new, recognizable type of sonnet in the sixteenth century, when poets and readers know about other sonnets and can draw the analogy to Italianate octave–sestet rhyme schemes by then used in English. Indeed, we might note that the "English" sonnet rhyme scheme emerged in two stages: first Thomas Wyatt developed a preference for closing sestets with a couplet, and then Surrey made conclusive shift from octave and sestet to three quatrains and couplet. This continuity across multiple stages of development helped to ensure that the "English" rhyme scheme could still find recognition as a sonnet. Metham's lyric, by contrast, would probably have been too radical a break from existing tradition to find recognition as a sonnet.

Fifteenth-century English already had other rhyme schemes which more closely echoed the octave–sestet arrangement of the Italian sonnet, such as the through-rhymed fourteen-line roundel favored by Charles d'Orléans. As Holton notes, this form "generally

breaks naturally into eight + six … and its length is close to a defining feature, as is not the case with poems built of couplets or rhyme royal stanzas."[39] (Or, one might add, in poems built of quatrains and couplets.) Given the total absence of other known fifteenth-century English comparanda drawing directly on the Italian sonnet tradition, the contrasting presence of other fourteen-line English lyrics with no direct relation to Italian lyrics, and the non-identity of this lyric's rhyme scheme with those found in Italian sonnets, it is highly unlikely that Metham's lyric was written or read as a contribution to the sonnet tradition. As Patricia Clare Ingham has observed, innovation paradoxically depends on repetition and pre-existing knowledge: the repetition of a pattern renders that pattern recognizable, and recognizably "new." A genuinely new, as-yet-unrepeated pattern lacks identity.[40] Ironically, Metham's lyric would have been more identifiable and would have seemed more innovative had English sonnets with Italianate rhyme schemes been available to readers.

In practice, bearing in mind the probable aural reception of verse and the strong element of "aurality" perhaps present even in reading by eye from the page at this time, readers probably perceived the most basic structure of this lyric to be that outlined by its rhyme: three quatrains and a couplet.[41] However, past scholarship has gestured to the colored initials in the sole surviving copy as evidence for the lyric's identity as a sonnet. In this copy of *Amoryus and Cleopes*, a colored large initial marks the start of each stanza throughout; I indicate the distribution of colored initials in my quotation of the lyric above using bold type, and readers may also refer to Figure 1. Page remarks that the lyric "is clearly presented as a sonnet in the manuscript: its two quatrains [. . .] are marked with large initial capitals."[42] However, the initials offer more equivocal evidence than that. Granted, they indicate a fourteen-line lyric of some kind, with the large initial at line 402 terminating the lyric and reintroducing the surrounding stanza structure. However, when heard aloud, divided by its rhyme structure, the lyric has three quatrains, not two. Page's phrasing suggests circular

argumentation which avoids attention to the rhyme scheme itself: because the lyric is a sonnet, it is two quatrains and a sestet, not three quatrains and a couplet; therefore, the scribe left spaces for large initials marking two quatrains and a sestet; therefore, the lyric has two quatrains and a sestet; therefore, the lyric is a sonnet. But the lyric has not two but three quatrains, and all three colored initials have equal size and weight, taking up the full height of one ruled line. Consequently, while the colored initials do mark out a final six-line stanza, they also mark the first two of the three quatrains as units of equal significance to that six-line stanza. The initials, then, do not pick out the 4–4–4–2 structure heard in the lyric's rhyme, but they equally do not pick out the 8–6 structure that anyone familiar with the sonnet tradition as it stood at this time would have associated with the form. Had the scribe wanted to show this structure, colored initials would appear only at the lyric's first and ninth lines. Instead, the initials suggest a 4–4–6 structure, leaving a perceived sestet, today regarded as the shorter component in a sonnet, as the heaviest sub-unit. Whatever the scribe sought to mark in the distribution of spaces for large initials on this page, it was not a sonnet.

Several reasons thus make it unlikely either that Metham intended this lyric as a sonnet or that his audience received it as one: probable ignorance of the Italian sonnet tradition, probable familiarity with fourteen-line English lyrics, the disjunction between this lyric's rhyme scheme and that of pre-existing sonnets, and, at least in this copy, a visual presentation in a structure unlike a sonnet. It is far more economical, and therefore far more plausible, to imagine that this lyric emerged organically from the existing tradition of short French and English amatory lyrics than it is to imagine that Metham first successfully made contact with the Italian sonnet tradition, then, second, invented the "English" *ababcdcdefefgg* arrangement with the hope that it would be recognized as an offspring of the Italian tradition despite its different rhyme scheme, and, third and finally, found real readers who did make that act of recognition, overriding the aural structure of three quatrains and a couplet, and, at

least in this copy, the visual structure of two equally-weighted quatrains and a sestet. Paul Strohm has called the first Canticus Troili "in a mild way, a 'scandal' for traditional literary history," since it constitutes a covert appearance of the sonnet in English before its historical place.[43] Metham's lyric is a much bigger scandal, because, unlike the first Canticus Troili, it matches the sonnet form, and also because scholarship can provide a literary genealogy for the Canticus in which Chaucer read Petrarch, a genealogy which a small coterie among Chaucer's first readers might even have recognized, but scholarship cannot provide a plausible literary genealogy for Metham's lyric.

Given the prestige the sonnet form unavoidably has for modern readers encountering this text, it also seems worth noting that the inset lyric's immediate formal context also reduces its distinctiveness. The rest of *Amoryus and Cleopes* experiments with form in other ways which would have made the inset lyric seem less singular and less extraordinary. I do not suggest that Metham's audience did not perceive the inset lyric as a marked passage in the poem. Introduced as it is by its own frame, and representing a break from the stanzaic patterns surrounding it, the lyric must have come across as a heightened moment. However, the romance as a whole contains a significant amount of such crafty variation. While this formal play should increase our appreciation for Metham's artistry, it would also have made his inset lyric seem less unique, special or originary.

Metham liked to vary stanza length and rhyme scheme. The text of *Amoryus and Cleopes* varies from its basic pattern of rhyme royal stanzas in two ways.[44] First, the rhyme scheme shifts: twenty-eight stanzas rhyme *ababacc* and eighteen rhyme *abaabcc*. Second, the lengths of stanzas vary: there are sixteen six-line stanzas, nine eight-line stanzas, and two isolated couplets. Exceptionally, one of the eight-line stanzas rhymes *aaaaaabb* (1989–96). Chaucer provided a precedent for a shift to one continuous rhyme, and in a sense the shift only fulfils even more stringently the contract which repeated rhyme makes with listeners, for

the first line does still rhyme with the third, the second with the fourth and fifth; the stanza's conceptually distinct rhyme-sounds simply happen to rhyme with each other too.[45] But, like the lyric, this *aaaaaabb* stanza would have stood out to Metham's audience, for it begins with the kind of adjacent (*xx*) rhyme which normally closes Metham's rhyme royal stanzas. Like the lyric, too, it is direct speech, and a passage of bravura display: it is the hermit Ore's exorcism prayer, driving a devil out of an idolatrous statue of Venus. This stanza's *a*-rhyme, -*ion*, allows Metham to display his grasp of vocabulary through various polysyllabic romance words (1989–94), and the concluding *b*-rhyme wraps up with thumpingly contrastive contempt for the devil in the stanza's closing word, *sckorn* (1996). This stanza gave Metham's audience another moment in the text of formal play and display comparable to that of the inset lyric and, indeed, even more divergent from Metham's normal standard in its hammering on the same rhyme sound for six lines.

Another bravura passage occurs when Cleopes delivers an entertaining taxonomy of different kinds of dragon in her effort to find out which type her paramour must fight. This example, again delivered in direct speech, would dawn more slowly on the audience, but lasts longer than the inset lyric. In Cleopes' taxonomy, Metham's variation of stanza length creates what can only be a deliberate chiastic ABCBA pattern, though to my knowledge no modern reader has pointed out its artifice:

One eight-line stanza (1241–8)

    Two seven-line stanzas (1249–62)

        Three six-line stanzas (1263–80)

    Two seven-line stanzas (1281–94)

One eight-line stanza (1295–1302)

The weighty but isolated eight-line stanzas here top and tail Cleopes' catalogue (1241–94), marking out her list as a spectacular set-piece display of lore (on her part) and invention (on Metham's part). The two eight-line stanzas are somewhat different in function, but the second answers the first: the first begins with Cleopes' question, "But qwat serpent ys yt?", while the second finally brings us to the right type of dragon, and shifts the conversation on to Cleopes' advice on the proper way to slay it. There is a sustained and growing pleasure to be found here in the modulation of stanza lengths and in the repeated tripping-up of audience expectation within a structure which is, nevertheless, predictable once grasped. Like the *aaaaaabb* stanza, the catalogue of dragons might have been as memorable as the inset lyric for Metham's audience.

We have not fully appreciated this playfulness in Metham because poems reach us through, or as, received ideas in past editions. In this case, we have been content with Hardin Craig's assessment that Metham wrote "a degenerated form of rhyme royal," verse which "has no peculiarities of special interest."[46] Metham was not incompetent, and at least most of the formal variation in his poem is neither incompetence nor scribal meddling, but rather inventive experimentation.[47] Metham's other work, in prose, suggest an interest in technical topics. Hannah Bower has recently demonstrated the literary qualities and instincts running through the *Fachliteratur* of this period, and the experimentation with stanza length and rhyme scheme in *Amoryus and Cleopes* might represent the literary outworking of a sensibility honed by technical writing.[48] These other passages of heightened formal play help to secure the inset lyric's place as the result of conscious artifice: if they are deliberate and thought-through, so is the lyric. However, Metham's modulation of form elsewhere also makes the lyric less special in its immediate formal context: it is neither incompetent nor arbitrary, but it is hardly the only formal gambol in the poem. The poem's audience would

have met a series of formally heightened moments in the text rather than just the one fourteen-line lyric.

In the surviving manuscript copy, the fact of the page design, ruled at twenty-eight lines per page for rhyme royal, also dents some of the lyric's exceptionality. Leaving aside any ideas about sonnets, one practicality would have encouraged a fourteen-line structure for the inset poem: fourteen lines occupy the space of two rhyme royal stanzas. In writing a quatrain–couplet lyric of fourteen lines, rather than simply three quatrains or four quatrains, Metham could disrupt his audience's aural expectations, shaped by rhyme royal, while still making life easier for anyone copying his poem—perhaps, initially, himself—by slotting that disruption into a space itself shaped *for* rhyme royal. This consideration, too, leaves the lyric looking less special and makes it harder to position it as a grand literary-historical precursor.

Given the present-day economy of literary prestige, Metham's inset lyric tempts any Middle English specialist to claim the honor of the sonnet tradition for the fifteenth century. However, I have argued, several reasons should give us pause. The lyric probably emerged from and was read within the tradition of short Middle English lyrics, possibly also shaped in this case by the surrounding structure of a poem built in seven-line units. Contact with the actually-existing Italian sonnet tradition of the time is unlikely. Moreover, as one among a number of experiments in the manipulation of verse form in *Amoryus and Cleopes*, the lyric probably did not stand out to Metham's audience as something special in the way that a fifteenth-century poem rhyming *ababcdcdefefgg* stands out to sonnet-aware readers today. It cannot straightforwardly be called a sonnet—hence the quotation marks in my title—but it is probably the only known English example of sonnet form outside the sonnet tradition.

The lyric examined

Yet form will have its due. I have labored literary-historical factors and formal aspects of the poem which make it something other than a glorious innovation. Nevertheless, the lyric's particular form does deliver effects closely analogous to those found in later sonnets. The preceding arguments have laid the groundwork for a reading of this lyric as it is, eschewing a sonnet framework. Ironically, reading the lyric without a sonnet framework reveals qualities which echo those claimed for the sonnet by its specialists: "a unifying play of mind and language" matched with "fertility in structural complexity," say, or an "articulation of carefully weighted structural components" together with a characteristic intimacy.[49] This close reading has value in and of itself, but since the lyric is, historically speaking, not a sonnet, this reading also isolates what in the poem is irreducible to history and context, that is, the quiddity or essence of its form.

Page, in his brief treatment of the lyric, remarks that the "thought pattern does not exactly coincide with the stanzas, but there is a general sonnet-like organization of ideas into two parts."[50] As I noted above, Page's two parts are an octave and a sestet, and Robertson follows and elaborates on Page's understanding of the lyric as "presenting in the first two quatrains a lament to fortune, and then in the following sestet narrowing the focus by attributing the true cause of his pain to his unattainable beloved."[51] However, refraining from the automatic imposition of an octave–sestet template reveals a productive tension between multiple structures in the lyric, a tension which in turn does recall effects found in many sonnets.

Though neither the rhyme nor the surviving manuscript copy reflect it, the octave–sestet arrangement read by Page and Robertson does appear in the poem's distribution of topical attention, which shifts after the lyric's first eight lines, when the lover turns to focus (yet) more solipsistically on his own state. This transition is marked by the seventh and final

"O" of the poem which, unlike all the others, does not introduce an apostrophe—as the reader might expect, having heard the first six—but is simply a groan (396); at this point the lover descends from rhetoric to the animal expression of emotion. The shift is also marked by the fact that the speaker begins to be the subject of verbs, which he is not, leaving aside an implied but unwritten "art" in the fourth line, up to this point.[52] However, this structure runs in counterpoint to a different set of divisions. After the first line, every rhyme unit in the lyric begins with "But", so that, reinforced by the rhyme, the primary aural structure here is not *ababcdcd–efefgg*, but rather [O]*abab* [But]*cdcd* [But]*efef* [But]*gg*. The construction of the first quatrain around numerous *qwy* questions, the only questions in the inset poem, further distinguishes the first four lines in particular. When the lyric is read as three distinct quatrains followed by a couplet, subdivisions and thought patterns match exactly. In brief past readings of this lyric the iconicity of the sonnet's form, familiar today yet probably unfamiliar to the poem's initial readership, has thus affected critical understanding. It has done so in ways which obscure an interplay of mind and language of the sort associated with later sonnets.

Robertson and Page both bracket the second quatrain (392–395) as a block addressed to Fortune.[53] However, these lines craft an elegant ambiguity, placing content and rhyming structure in another counterpoint arrangement. When the audience first encounters "Thowe" in the sixth line, they will, quite sensibly, interpret the pronoun as a reference to Fortune, the only addressee in the poem thus far. The words in the seventh and eighth lines then become somewhat destabilizing to read, since the "lady souereyn," the more proximate cause of the lover's distress, is only specified at the end of the eighth line. As a possible description of Fortune, "bryghter þan Phebus" sounds odd, but the comparison to "Phebus" contains enough classicizing erudition to hold the audience in suspense for a moment—is a different figure meant, or have we missed an allusion? It is only across the course of the following apostrophes that it becomes clear that Fortune is no longer addressed in the seventh and

eighth lines. These apostrophes obfuscate in a riddling way, offering a comparative and a superlative ("bryghter þan Phebus", "most goodely", 394–5) as stand-ins for nouns, without explicit referents, and with three metaphors sandwiched between them. Readers therefore spend the seventh and eighth lines lacking someone—replicating the lover's experience—and only find that person when, at the eighth line's close, the lover reveals that he has lost her.

The gradual revelation of the shift of addressee from Fortune to the lady conflates the two for the reader, sustaining the idea, frequent in traditions of "feinere love" (404), that the power and agency lie in the lady's hands. The lady and Fortune are both feminine figures to whom the lover is a "seruant in al maner of lovlynes," and this conflation will recur at the lyric's close: does the speaker say "adwe" to the lady or, more philosophically, to the futile service of Fortune (401)? Adept listeners might, of course, pick up the hint offered by the use of *compleyn* as the first *d*-rhyme in the lyric proper and recall, having heard the *compleyn*:*souereyn* rhyme in the frame stanza (386–7), that this is someone speaking "for hys ladyiz sake" (385). However, though the frame and the lyric could interact fruitfully here for some, a sense of productive uncertainty over the addressee dominates. This sliding of addressee, at once taking advantage of and quietly undermining the conjunction structure and rhyme scheme, is the kind of artful effect we might expect in a sixteenth-century English sonnet. I mean no disrespect to Robertson and Page in suggesting that they have not spotted it—they deserve praise for attending at all to a poem so rarely read—but I think they show how hard it is to read a sonnet-like lyric without seeing it through a sonnet template. Paradoxically, that template can obscure dense modulations and counterpoints—of tone, register, address, *et cetera*—which read today as characteristically sonnet-like.

Thus, although the colored initials lay out the division [**O**]*abab* [**B**]*cdcd* [**B**]*efefgg*, then, and although the explicit pattern of conjunctions and rhyme aurally deliver a [O]*abab* [But]*cdcd* [But]*efef* [But]*gg* arrangement, these structures coexist with a topical structure

cutting across the others: [Fortune]*ababcd* [Lady]*cd* [Lover]*efefgg*. The apostrophe at the start of the seventh line (394), the first since the lyric's first word, helps to demarcate this division, as perhaps does the meter of the second half of the sixth line (393), in which, as I read it, both permitted pairs of adjacent offbeats occur at the end—"that *cau*syth me *thus* to com*pleyn*"—lending the line-ending extra metrical weight in contrast to the two preceding line-endings. The lyric also becomes more syntactically slippery here at the transition from the sixth to the seventh line, the middle of the second quatrain: in Middle English, as today, "thus" can refer forwards or backwards, and so the audience cannot tell whether the speaker means that his complaining "thus" is exemplified in the preceding five-and-a-half lines, or in the following eight. If the following eight lines are meant, then we can add them to Nuttall's classification of the lyric as a whole, as a complaint within a complaint, "within a frame, within a song, inset into a narrative poem." Placing a colon at the end of the sixth line, as I have, highlights this reading, but occludes the other, and a period is excessively clarifying in the opposite direction. This line break presents one of those places, familiar to editors, where any form of the present-day punctuation which we are required to add will say too much.

The third quatrain broadens to include hints of a community beyond the speaker and his lady, in a manner which accidentally anticipates the paranoia of some sonnets written under Henry VIII. The speaker fears the work of "summe enmye," and finds himself "fro alle creaturys abiecte" now that he is out of favor (396, 398). The lyric's ninth line confuses because it says both too little and too much. The speaker has been undone by "summe enmye or sum suspycyus coniecte": together, the presentation of alternatives, the repetition of the uncertain "summe" and the ambiguous meaning of "coniecte" itself are either confused or confusing. Myklebust suggests from statistical evidence that Metham patterns lines' lengths to fashion passages of relative predictability, punctured by sudden line-length variation for surprise and emphasis.[54] This line exemplifies such metrical surprise, for it and the preceding

line approach the maximum length which Metham allows himself, while the following lines retreat suddenly to more normal lengths. The speaker's offering of alternatives itself drags the line out. *Coniecten* could mean "to suppose" or "to conspire / contrive," a teasing ambiguity which leaves us no clearer on what has been done to the speaker: is he the victim of a plot, or simply of a misprision? The choice of *suspycyus* adds to the ambiguity, for this adjective too offers a choice between contradictory alternatives, meaning either "open to question" or "injurious." In writing "coniecte" Metham made a slightly alien lexical choice, as the noun is rare and late in Middle English—though readers with a little Latin (many readers, at this time) or those who knew the verb might have grasped it—but "throwyn" is a kind of gloss on both "coniecte" and "abiecte." "I throwyn am asyde" therefore echoes "coniecte" and prefigures "abiecte," but also introduces a blunter note (397). Or perhaps a simplifying note: the speaker's resignation in the closing couplet involves a retreat to rustic *otium* "among þise grene leuys" (401). The last line is all Germanic lexis, and it crunches the first, French-derived rhyme-word of the couplet, *felycyté*, into English's simplest verb rhyme, *be* (400–1), the first monosyllabic rhyme-word and the first Germanic rhyme-word in eleven lines. This pairing across registers strengthens the finality offered by the rhyme scheme.

If the poem has one definitive turning point, which could anachronistically take the term *volta*, it falls not at the ninth line, but here, at the arrival of the couplet. Many later Middle English complaint lyrics end still resting in the "repetitive atemporalities of 'complaint time'," but this one instead finds a resolution, spinning a farewell and a possible futurity out of the present when the speaker says "now adwe foreuer" (400).[55] The first twelve lines, by contrast, do not look forward but instead oscillate between the "nowe" of the complaint and the "sumtyme" of past happiness, much as the poem's first five finite verbs alternate neatly between past and present tense. In keeping with this temporal oscillation and with the speaker's emotional state, the syntax of these first twelve lines becomes increasingly

tortured. After its opening explanations, the questions of the first quatrain offer straightforward structures. The second quatrain makes the audience wait for its first main verb ("beraft," 393), and then enters the series of apostrophes discussed above. More complex still, an exclamation subordinated to "allas! þat" makes up the bulk of the third quatrain, with a further subordinate clause ("þru summe enmye or sum suspycyus coniecte") preceeding the passive verb ("throwyn am"); two appositive lines then rather abstrusely ask the reader to tie them back to the auxiliary "am" and expand that verb's sense into a more general copula: the speaker is "throwyn . . . asyde and owte," but he also is "fro alle creaturys abiecte" and "often sqwownyng" (398–9). After those increasingly complex first twelve lines, the couplet introduces a new sense of peace in rather easier syntax.

The closing couplet also relates to the surrounding verse in which the lyric is embedded. It returns to a certain formal normality, ushering the audience back towards the romance. Its rhyme, the first adjacent (*xx*) rather than interlaced (*xyxy*) instance heard since the lyric's start, recalls the closing *cc* couplets in the preceding rhyme royal stanzas. Meanwhile, the couplet's content returns, through its mention of "þise grene leuys," to the springtime of the frame stanza, in which the birds "amonge þe leuys grene gan rest" (383). The return comes with a contrastive twist, though: the birds rest after "euery byrde hath chosyn hys louely make" (382), yet the speaker rests alone. (One might read the whole lyric as birdsong, reinterpreting the "one" of line 385 as a bird, though I do not think this is the primary interpretation available.) The small word "þise" also holds significance here: up to this line, the speaker has labored his temporal position but has not mentioned his physical situation, and this is the lyric's first proximal demonstrative. "Þise" recalls to mind the eavesdropping frame, in which the frame-speaker overhears the lyric-speaker of the lyric, and so the word retrospectively injects more intimacy into the earlier lines of complaint. It also, however, begins to draw the audience back out of the lyric, through the layer of the frame

stanza, to escape into the romance. In parallel, the speaker does achieve a kind of temporal escape, albeit one more resigned than happy, in the final couplet, and this distinguishes the lyric from many other complaint poems of the period. Unsurprisingly, given the rhyme scheme, the effect resembles that of a sonnet, but of a Shakespearean sonnet rather than an octave–sestet sonnet. This lyric does, then, accidentally anticipate later sonnets in several ways, despite the likelihood that Metham did not write it as a sonnet.

The lyric is also, however, part of a larger text. If "narrative is about what happens next" while "lyric is about what happens now," how does the rest of *Amoryus and Cleopes*, the "what happens next," connect to the lyric moment?[56] Careful reading of the text of the lyric itself produces this question. The lyric obviously relates in its "sentens" (402) to the immediately preceding discussion of love affairs, and to the romance's declared topic, "The chauns of love, and eke the peyn" (1). The lyric receives no distinctive manuscript paratextual signposting of the sort that separate out the cantici Troili in some witnesses, and proleptic and analeptic references in the immediately preceding and following lines integrate the song as a whole into the romance: the last line before the song reads "Thys song of love wyth lusty voys thei gan to syng", while the first following words run "Thys was the dyte of ther fresch songe" (380, 402).

More significantly, internal quotation also binds narrative "next" and lyric "now" strongly together. The lyric's frame stanza places its narrative "Qwan flourys sprede in May, of monthys myryest" (381), while the opening frame for the entire romance places the story "In May, that modyr ys of monthys glade, / Qwan flourys sprede" (8–9). To have the lyric's frame echo the romance's frame particularly encourages readers to link the two. The echo implies that the lyric's frame is, in some miniature, synecdochic way, another entity comparable to the romance. This similarity might, despite its closeness, be the product of convention—both statements certainly are conventional—but a second internal quotation

strengthens the likelihood of deliberate craft in both cases. The lyric ends with its disappointed speaker-lover finding a sense of withdrawn resignation: "now, adwe forever, for my ful felycyté / Is among thise grene leuys for to be" (400–1). Strikingly, the phrase "my ful felycyté" occurs exactly one other time in *Amoryus and Cleopes*, in the same grammatical position, once again with the *felycyté*:*be* rhyme pairing, yet in precisely the opposite circumstances: when the lovers first establish to their satisfaction that they love each other mutually, Amoryus exclaims that "to be wyth yow ever is my fulle felycyté" (1140–1). Through these quotations, the text of the lyric, examined closely, itself challenges any attempt to read it in isolation. The quotations might indicate that Metham wrote, or at least adapted, the lyric for the romance, and certainly invite some close consideration of the lyric's ties to *Amoryus and Cleopes* as a whole.

Given the tie between the lyric love-complaint and the moment of Amoryus' success in love, it seems reasonable to ask why the tones of these two lexically matched moments diverge so sharply. Why does Amoryus quote the memorable lyric from earlier in the poem in an exactly opposite situation? The link between the two moments looks contrastive, and the romance seems to me to have a guarded, even repudiatory, relationship with the lyric it contains. "Foure knytys hos ful devocion / Was set in worldly plesauns" (378–9) sing the framing "song of love" which itself holds the lyric, and Palamedon judges that what the knights are up to is "but vanyté and foly" (408). I think readers are expected to accept Palamedon's judgement, for several reasons. When the "yonge knytys" sing playfully together (403), part of the point is that they *are* young, and therefore liable to be wrong. They are "fresch galauntys" (409), a stock phrase of moral disapproval in this period, and the passage repeatedly emphasizes their youth.[57] Amoryus' name, if it is original to Metham, perhaps puns on "amorous"—an adjective available to Metham in Chaucer, Gower or Lydgate—or, possibly, on *amor (h)ereos*, that is, lovesickness, again a concept and phrase

available to Metham in elder poets and in medical thought.[58] Either meaning invites

scepticism about Amoryus' judgement. Indeed, throughout the poem Amoryus is instructed

and guided, first by Palamedon, then by Cleopes with her advice on the slaying of dragons,

and ultimately, together with Cleopes, by a Christian hermit, Ore, who brings about their

conversion.

Moreover, and most importantly, despite their relationship of quotation the narrative

of *Amoryus and Cleopes* never substantiates the inset lyric's tones and contents. Indeed, the

body of the narrative rebuts the lyric's complaints point-for-point. Cleopes is never cruel or

"daungerous" like the lady in the lyric, and no question mark hangs over her possible

acceptance of Amoryus. Amoryus has no rivals in love. The lyric's speaker castigates

Fortune, but Fortune smiles on Amoryus almost continuously: his one moment of real

unhappiness in love, when he commits suicide in a replaying of the Pyramus and Thisbe plot,

is swiftly (though surprisingly) remedied. The speaker of the lyric suffers from one-sided

love-swooning, yet when love induces swooning in the narrative proper, when Cleopes and

Amoryus find they can speak through the wall separating them, it is both lovers who fall "on

owdyr syde on sqwounyng," together (1113). By any standards, and most especially by the

standards of other romances, Amoryus seems a truly fortunate lover. Finally, there is the

internal quotation itself: the pointed repetition of "my ful felycyté," the only recurrence of

this phrase in the poem, echoes the lyric's ending only to deliver a sharply contrasting

depiction of love (400–1, 1141).

Amoryus and Cleopes partially repudiates its inset lyric because Metham stages a

contest between different innovations. Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald rightly

remark, briefly characterizing the romance and noting the inset lyric, that "'the new' is

everywhere in *Amoryus and Cleopes*," and in this the poem reflects its influences: Ingham

has read the Squire's Tale as a set of incisive, unresolved questions about innovation, and

Fumo highlights precisely this tale, alongside the Franklin's Tale, as an important resource for the interest in novelties and marvels in Metham's writing.[59] The poem does not, however, present all of its novelties as good. It transmits conventional ideas about love, marriage and civic affairs, ideas typical of its patronage and probable audience.[60] Amoryus and Cleopes are pagans who play out the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, but then are resurrected, convert to Christianity, and live conventionally successful lives, eventually passing away and being memorialized in ways which flatter Metham's patrons by analogy (2080–107). Due to these conventionalizing instincts, the positively-presented novelty in *Amoryus and Cleopes*, the novelty which emerges victorious, narratively speaking, is a particular one: Christianity. As Fumo puts it, "romance itself is converted from pagan tragedy to Christian comedy."[61]

The rebuilding of Albanest's temple of Venus, early in the narrative, includes the construction of an armillary sphere powered by an impressive 700,000 demons, which levitates and perpetually spins (444–629). In his extended description of the sphere, Metham engages in a bravura display of learning and ability, and the text repeatedly notes the sphere's "mervulus" quality (530, 629, 640). However, when the hermit Ore casts out the demons powering the sphere, during the conversion of Albanest, his act pits innovation against innovation. Ore invites the population to "se / More mervellys yit; for or we go, / Thys fantastyk spere fordone schal be" (2005–7), and at his prayer the sphere collapses into an empty marvel, or an anti-marvel: "noght apperyd—noudyr gold, sylver, ner precyus stone" (2025). The sphere's fate has a didactic payoff: resurrection and the Christian faith are the true marvels. It is embarrassing—but also amusing—that the first known appearance of the English sonnet rhyme scheme is presented as something to be tolerated and smiled at in exuberant youth, but then superseded by conversion and successful, conventional Christian marriage. Metham's inset lyric is both a road not taken in actual literary history and a road

not taken within his poem. His setting of romance and lyric in conversation with each other is a particular and unusual achievement.

I do not contend that with this lyric Metham wrote an outright masterpiece, or that every reader must like the results. Derek Pearsall characterized fifteenth-century love-complaint as conventional in theme and language, and significantly diminished when approached shorn of its probable original context of lively performance and debate.[62] I have differed from Pearsall's estimation of Metham's skill here, but I see strength in these remarks on complaint. Today, when many readers of Anglophone poetry have been reared on modernism and its long aftermath, plays on convention which probably leapt off the page 570 years ago can seem merely repetitious. Metham's repetition of phrases and rhyme-pairings between the frame stanza and the lyric proper lies open for criticism; I imagine some readers will never be reconciled to Metham's meter; and, more broadly, one might take issue with the lyric's solipsism, as, I have suggested, the surrounding romance perhaps does itself. However, the lyric has real virtues, and many of those virtues match the claims made for later sonnets. This poem displays fertile structural complexity, a fruitful interplay of form and thought, and a logical temporal scheme of oscillation between past and present ended by a rueful escape into the future. It also engages in fruitful dialogue with its surrounding text. Metham wrote strangely, but with care and real, effective craft, and the historical atomization of this *ababcdcdefefgg* lyric in a period without English sonnets cannot extinguish the formal effects he created.

Form's persistence

I have not sought here to contribute particularly to the study of the lyric as a mode or genre. The ideas generated by work on premodern insular lyric have informed my thinking, but Metham's lyric, being built into a much longer poem, does not resemble the examples driving

most such studies.[63] Metham's lyric is neither marginal in its manuscript, nor multilingual, nor mundane, nor improvisational. It has a substantial written context, unlike the troublesomely context-free "Rawlinson Lyrics" explored by J. A. Burrow.[64] It is not, in the terminology Ingrid Nelson develops from Michel de Certeau, "tactical."[65] Rather than trying to intervene in lyric studies, I have explored this lyric as an acute problem for our understanding of form and history. In a reassessment around this century's start, historicism has gradually become another accreted stratum of method, no longer an entirely dominating project, and form has taken on a new prominence.[66] Various wrestlings with that prominence have figured form and history as inextricable partners.[67] In a similar vein, the close of Ardis Butterfield's incisive category study of "medieval lyric" leaves us with form liminally "on and off the page, in and out of language, in and out of history."[68] I agree with much in these accounts, and I certainly do not wish here to replay disciplinary contests over the relative roles of form and history: the two seem intimately related much of the time. Rather, my focus is on the nature of form itself. Metham's inset lyric shows, as a kind of limit case, how some aspects of form do sometimes sit in isolation, "out of history." It shows too what some of those aspects might be, and it asks present-day readers to think through what is meant by "form."

Patricia Thomson once asked "why," when Chaucer tackled Petrarch's Sonnet 132, "since he was never slow to experiment with foreign metrical forms . . . did he not attempt a quatorzain?"[69] Chaucer's failure to write Troilus' song in fourteen lines only becomes a failure after the sixteenth-century ascent of the sonnet in England, of course, but Thomson's question usefully strikes on an observable difference. The first Canticus Troili catches elements of its source, holds virtues of its own, and might well serve up poetry more amenable to present-day readers than Metham's strange inset lyric. However, it lacks the cramped, contrapuntal qualities of a sonnet, while Metham's lyric has those qualities, for the

straightforward reason that one is twenty-one lines long and the other is only fourteen. Similarly, a rhyme scheme splitting a lyric into three quatrains and a couplet offers something different to and more flexible than a through-rhymed octave and a sestet. The seven-line gap between the "Canticus Troili" and Metham's lyric, and the structural difference between the Petrarchan and "English" rhyme schemes both sit outside time. They possess an atemporality deeper than that found in fifteenth-century complaint. They are formal matters requiring to formalist treatment.

When I began writing about Metham's sonnet-like lyric I did not expect to make a (qualified) argument for the autonomy of poetry. That is, however, where the lyric leads when, on close examination, its temporally-incongruous position does not spoil its effects. I recognize, of course, that my proposals about the lyric's effects do themselves come from a particular time, the early twenty-first century, and that the close reading I have applied to the lyric is a specific, historicizable practice with its own associations and assumptions. Close reading often has been, as Stephanie Trigg puts it in an essay on the beginning of the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*, "strongly linked to the ideological values apparent in canonical literature" and to "an idealist fantasy of textual integrity."[70] I have chosen to read Metham's lyric closely nevertheless, because it has minimal canonicity. Because it lacks canonicity, a close reading of it might unsettle things—such as our sense for which writings deserve attention, and our sense for what close reading is and is for—rather than reinscribing a hierarchy. I have not asserted pure independence for this lyric, and have pointed instead to literary-historical ties, more plausible than ties to the sonnet tradition as it existed in the fifteenth century, which can integrate it into literary history: it might well have roots in existing French and English traditions of amatory *complainte*, or in the other analogues I first adduced. The phrase "textual integrity" might also remind us that I have not here addressed the lyric's textual state. With only one witness, textual-critical comment on *Amoryus and*

Cleopes has tight limits, but it, too, could bind the lyric back into time. I do not suggest that the lyric itself is somehow timeless.

It is, rather, aspects of the lyric's form which I propose have a timelessness and an ahistoricity. In these, some basic continuities pertain: cognition has not changed much in the last six centuries, while metrically divided lines, first-person lament, and competing subdivisions in counterpoint have been possibilities throughout the known history of verse. Perhaps we should distinguish form-with-an-article, "a form" ("the sonnet"), from the immediate local effects of form-without-an-article. A form can be unrecognized, and historical position alters even basic formal features. Context controls exactly what rhyme is, for instance. Some kind of rhyme exists in the words "Swa nu world wendeþ, wyrde sendeþ / ond hetes henteð, hæleþe scyndeð" ("So now the world changes, sending fate / on hatred's heels to ruin noble men").[71] Rhyme of a sort also exists in the words "Low sinks the scale surcharg'd with Hector's fate; / Heavy with death it sinks, and hell receives the weight."[72] Are these rhymes precisely equivalent, however? No. As the title assigned to the *Rhyming Poem* by modern students of Old English itself indicates, consistent rhyme would have read differently in a context in which English poems rarely took it as an obligatory feature. The experimentation with obligatory rhyme in the *Rhyming Poem* shows that the form was thinkable for at least one poet at the time, but also, through contrast with other poems, that it was typically rejected by other poets.[73] Rhyme sounded and meant differently again in the Augustan period. Similarly, the specific configuration of the English *ababcdcdefefgg* lyric would have read differently in a world without English sonnets, and the crown of England's first sonneteer rests only awkwardly on John Metham's pate.

However, away from *the* form—the sonnet form, the form in time—there is also just form. Metham's lyric has a length and a rhyme scheme which drive particular predictable effects, just as surely as the phenomena in the *Rhyming Poem* and Pope's Homer are

recognizably related. The history of formal invention is partly a history of reinvention, after all. In fact, mid-fifteenth-century East Anglia saw a possible antecedent for the sixteenth century's other famous innovation in English verse form, blank verse. A partial Middle English verse translation of Claudian's *De consolatu Stilichonis* emerged at Clare, in Suffolk, in 1445.[74] The preface and *envoi* of this text use rhyme royal, but the translation proper is undeniably blank, having meter but neither obligatory rhyme nor obligatory alliteration. The poet probably attempted, as in sixteenth-century blank verse, to find form echoing the lack of obligatory ornament in classical Latin poetry; the surviving manuscript certainly links the blank Middle English verse to the Latin text, for it presents the two on parallel facing pages.[75] In this case the fifteenth-century antecedent does respond to the type of earlier material, Latin hexameter, which would go on to inspire comparable sixteenth-century verse forms, and the blank Middle English Claudian therefore lacks the accidental quality of Metham's lyric. It does, however, offer another instance of form before its time. The Claudian translation is, moreover, not the first English poem with metrical regularity but without obligatory rhyme or alliteration: though scholarship rarely applies the word, the early Middle English verse of the *Orrmulum* is blank.[76] Poets repeatedly took a blank approach to English verse, and eventually, in the sixteenth century, circumstances permitted that approach to become recognizable and recognized.

I hope my remarks have cast light on the value and craft in Metham's work in general, and on some possibilities for further studies in the treatment of verse romance as verse. This lyric reminds us, too, that inspiration could strike poets before the sixteenth century. Most significantly of all, however, Metham's lyric offers scholarship a convenient, clear instance of form in action before it becomes *a* form. While the East Anglian subjects of Henry VI might not have spotted a sonnet at twenty paces, they certainly could have appreciated the intricacies of Metham's lyric. It is very like what we think of as a sonnet, and is very likely to

have certain effects in reading even if the reader has never read a sonnet. A certain essence of form cannot be reduced to or handled through any other aspect of literary study. It will be what it will be, nothing more but also nothing less.

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1 John Metham, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, Stephen F. Page, ed. (Kalamazoo, 1999), 388–401. Except for the lyric and its frame stanza, further references to *Amoryus and Cleopes* are taken from this edition, with line numbers supplied parenthetically. I have reservations about Page's punctuation (consider, for example, 385 and 2093), and silently supply my own in a few quotations. Readers of the online text of this edition (<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/page-metham-amoryus-and-cleopes>, accessed 21 August 2020) should note that at the time of writing it contains at least one unmarked variation from the print version, an erroneous "A" at the start of 392. Readers of either version should note that the transcription occasionally errs (for example, "presens," Princeton University Library, Garrett MS 141, f. 24r, l. 24, recorded as "presnes," 404). The romance as

a whole is *New Index of Middle English Verse* (henceforth *NIMEV*) 3320, *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* (henceforth *DIMEV*) 5231. There is one other edition of the poem, in *The Works of John Metham, Including the Romance of "Amoryus and Cleopes," Edited from the Unique MS. in the Garrett Collection in the Library of Princeton University*, Hardin Craig, ed., EETS o.s. 132 (London, 1916). However, Craig's edition omits the portions of the erased closing lines which Page very helpfully recovered.

2 Stephen Page, "John Metham's *Amoryus and Cleopes*: Intertextuality and Innovation in a Chaucerian Poem," *Chaucer Review* 31 (1996): 201–208. Craig typographically distinguished the lyric and its preceeding frame stanza, implicitly recognizing its distinctiveness, but did not explicitly note it (*Works of John Metham*, pp. 14–15).

3 "Rhyme Royal and Romance," in Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson, eds., *The Transmission of Medieval Romance: Metres, Manuscripts and Early Prints* (Cambridge, U.K., 2018), 50–68, at 64.

4 Gordon Braden, "Petrarchism and its Counterdiscourses: The Sonnet Tradition from Wyatt to Milton," in Catherine Bates, ed., *A Companion to Renaissance Poetry* (Chichester, 2018) 250–61, at 253.

5 *The Sonnet* (Oxford, 2019), 21. In his edition Page notes the Norfolk holdings of the Howards as a possible vector for the transmission of the rhyme scheme from Metham to Surrey: Metham, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, 18n25. This seems technically possible, but improbable.

6 *Index of Middle English Verse* 2547 / *DIMEV* (where the rhyme scheme is misreported) 4039, edited and annotated in Sharon L. Jansen and Kathleen H. Jordan, eds., *The Welles Anthology: MS. Rawlinson C. 813* (Binghamton, NY, 1991), 209–211. In the sole surviving

copy, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C. 813, f. 53ᵛ, the letter part of the poem is marked as three stanzas, *aabcbc dede ffgg*. However, the scribe's perception of stanza-division should not be taken as definitive: they failed to recognize the following *ababbaba* octet taken from Lydgate as a unified entity, and marked it as though it formed two quatrains. If this poem has some relationship to the early English sonnet, then it is, at least in the surviving form of its text, especially notable for its female speaker: "vnto yow I nede nott to wryte my name," runs the closing couplet of the letter portion, "for she þat louethe yow best send yow þis same."

7 "An Obscured Tradition: The Sonnet and its Fourteen-Line Predecessors," *Review of English Studies* 62.255 (2011): 373–92.

[8] Such as Edmund Spenser: Andrew King, *The "Faerie Queene" and Middle English Romance: The Matter of Just Memory* (Oxford, 2002).

9 On romance's low prestige and its service as a reservoir of cultural information, see the thesis statement of an important collection: Nicola McDonald, "A Polemical Introduction," in Nicola McDonald, ed., *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance* (Manchester, 2004), 1–21, doi:10.7228/manchester/9780719063183.001.0001. For examples of fine work on romances as cultural-historical evidence, see Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic and Judith Weiss, eds., *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, U.K., 2010); Raluca Radulescu, *Romance and its Contexts in Fifteenth-Century England: Politics, Piety and Penitence* (Cambridge, U.K., 2013); Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2014), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199679782.001.0001; and Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald, eds., *Thinking Medieval Romance* (Oxford, 2018), doi:10.1093/oso/9780198795148.001.0001.

10 A countervailing interest can be detected—in, for example, some of the essays in Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson, eds., *The Transmission of Medieval Romance: Metres, Manuscripts and Early Prints* (Cambridge, U.K., 2018).

[11] The general model here is of course David Aers's writing on interiority: "A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the 'History of the Subject'," in *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (New York, 1992), 177–202; Holton, "An Obscured Tradition," is the particular forerunner.

12 Carol M. Meale, "Katherine de la Pole and East Anglian Manuscript Production in the Fifteenth Century: An Unrecognized Patron?" in Carol M. Meale and Derek Pearsall, eds., *Makers and Users of Medieval Books: Essays in Honour of A. S. G. Edwards* (Cambridge, U.K., 2014), 132–49, at 132 and 137.

13 Metham, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, pp. 2–3; Meale, "Katherine de la Pole," 135, 137–8.

14 Princeton University Library, Garrett MS 141; described in Don C. Skemer, Adelaide Bennett, Jean F. Preston, and William P. Stoneman, *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Princeton University Library*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 2013), 1:324–28.

15 Meale proposes, from Metham's use of a past-tense verb and distal temporal deixis in a closing mention of Henry VI (2155), that the epilogue was (re)written shortly before copying, during the reign of Edward IV, that is, after March 1461. This idea is not watertight—the past tense might be an address to posterity—but it is probable. The manuscript's decoration contains the Stapleton and de la Pole arms, probably placing its execution before Katherine's 1468 remarriage. Meale further proposes a narrower dating, founded on the thesis that Katherine commissioned this book and one other (New Haven, Beinecke Library, MS

Takamiya 38) at least in part to memorialize Miles Stapleton after his 1466 death: "Katherine de la Pole," 133–42. This is possible. Holly James-Maddocks explores some potential scribal and art-historical links in "The Illuminators of the Hooked-*g* Scribe(s) and the Production of Middle English Literature, c. 1460–c. 1490," *Chaucer Review* 51 (2016): 151–86; she (at 161–2) accepts Meale's dating.

16 For a useful summary of the narrative, see either Roger Dalrymple, "*Amoryus and Cleopes*: John Metham's Metamorphosis of Chaucer and Ovid," in Phillipa Hardman, ed., *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, U.K., 2002), 149–62, at 151; or Jamie C. Fumo, "John Metham's 'Straunge Style'," *Chaucer Review* 43 (2008): 215–37, doi:10.1353/ce.0.0011, at 221–2. Dalrymple, Fumo, and Page ("John Metham's *Amoryus and Cleopes*") all offer readings of Metham's reworkings of sources: Ovid's narrative of Pyramus and Thisbe, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and elements from the *Canterbury Tales*. Amy N. Vines has discussed the female provision of scientific and technical knowledge in the narrative: *Women's Power in Late Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, U.K., 2011), 53–83. Kara Doyle has productively framed the poem as a response to newly significant female patronage for writers: "Fabulous Women, Fables of Patronage: Metham's *Amoryus and Cleopes* and BL MS Additional 10304," in Seeta Chaganti, ed., *Medieval Poetics and Social Practice: Responding to the Work of Penn Szittya* (New York, 2010), 124–42.

[17] Transcribed from MS Garrett 141, f. 24ʳ, ll. 1–21. I have preserved thorn, **u** and **v**, and used **j** to represent long **i**, but I have silently expanded abbreviations, and have distinguished yogh and ezh even though the scribe does not. The scribe routinely doubles **f** in any position and I have regularized this to single **f**. Capitalization and word-division are my own; punctuation is ultimately my own responsibility too, though the colon at the end of l. 393 was initially suggested by an anonymous reader. The lineation reflects the manuscript page rather than

either of the edited texts. Bold type indicates a large colored initial. Square brackets indicate one emendation of what Craig, Page and I all think was probably a scribal error: the scribe wrote *sqwownyg* and then, I suspect, neglected to add a macron above the **y**.

18 "Dit, dit(i)e and ditee," 12 April 2016, *Stylisticienne* <http://stylisticienne.com/dit-ditie-and-ditee> (accessed 21 August 2020).

[19] *MED*, *s.v.* "forest n.", sense 3(a). *The Book of the Duchess*, 372; this and all subsequent references to works by Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987)

[20] An anonymous reader suggests to me that this couplet might be an element of marginal apparatus which has entered the main text during transmission. This is plausible, though we can be relatively confident that Metham was willing to write isolated couplets, because the one other isolated couplet in the poem is direct speech from one of the characters (1346–7), and so cannot be apparatus. The most recent full stanza before the lyric proper to vary from rhyme royal is one rhyming *abaabcc* (43–9).

21 Derek Pearsall, "The English Romance in the Fifteenth Century," *Essays and Studies* 29 (1976): 56–83, at 69.

[22] Nicholas Myklebust, "The Problem of John Metham's Prosody," in Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson, eds., *The Transmission of Medieval Romance: Metres, Manuscripts and Early Prints* (Cambridge, U.K., 2018), 149–69; "A Sonnet upon Sonnets," in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, James Kinsley, ed., 3 vols. (1968), 1:449, l. 14, my emphasis.

23 "The Problem of John Metham's Prosody," 160–68.

24 Thorlac Turville-Petre, "'Summer Sunday,' 'De Tribus Regibus Mortuis,' and 'The Awntyrs off Arthure': Three Poems in the Thirteen-Line Stanza," *Review of English Studies* 25.97 (1974): 1–14, doi:10.1093/res/XXV.97.1; Susanna Fein, "The Early Thirteen-Line Stanza: Style and Metrics Reconsidered," *Parergon* 18 (2000): 97–126, doi:10.1353/pgn.2000.0058.

25 Ad Putter, "Adventures in the Bob-and-Wheel Tradition: Narratives and Manuscripts," in Nicholas Perkins, ed., *Medieval Romance and Material Culture* (Cambridge, U.K., 2015), 146–63, at 157–61.

26 Ruth Kennedy, "Strong-Stress Metre in Fourteen-Line Stanza Forms," *Parergon* 18 (2000): 127–55, doi:10.1353/pgn.2000.0071.

27 Susanna Fein, "Twelve-Line Stanza Forms in Middle English and the Date of *Pearl*," *Speculum* 72 (1997): 367–98, doi:10.2307/3040975.

28 *"The Pearl," a Middle English Poem*, Charles G. Osgood, Jr., ed. (Boston, 1906), xlv. Twelve-line shapes have more recently proved attractive to poets writing in some way "away from" or "after" the sonnet: Helen Vendler, *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 41–2.

29 Cambridge, U. K., University Library, MS Ff.i.6, f. 28v (*NIMEV* 383 / *DIMEV* 643), ff. 153r–v (*NIMEV* 2277.8 / *DIMEV* 3666), and f. 154v (*NIMEV* 380 / *DIMEV* 640)

30 "The English Roundel, Charles's Jubilee, and Mimetic Form," in R. D. Perry and Mary-Jo Arn, eds., *Charles d'Orléans' English Aesthetic: The Form, Poetics, and Style of "Fortunes Stabilnes"* (Cambridge, U.K., 2020), 82–101, at 83–91. Besides its immediate interest for students of Charles d'Orléans, Nuttall's work on the English roundel in these pages also provides a brief history of the form in England, extending and correcting the list of examples

in Rossell Hope Robbins, "The Burden in Carols," *Modern Language Notes* 57 (1942): 16–22, doi:10.2307/2910675, at 20n17.

[31] "The Vanishing English Virelai: French *Complainte* in English in the Fifteenth Century," *Medium Ævum* 85 (2016): 59–76, doi:10.2307/26396470, at 67–71; see also Ardis Butterfield, "Lyric and Elegy in *The Book of the Duchess*," *Medium Ævum* 60 (1991): 33–60, doi:10.2307/43629381, at 37–8.

[32] *MED*, *s.v.* "sonet *n.*" and *OED*, *s.v.* "sonnet, *n.*" *Cleanness* is quoted from *The Poems of the "Pearl" Manuscript: "Pearl," "Cleanness," "Patience," "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 4th edition (Exeter, 2002), 1515–16; *Early English Versions of the "Gesta Romanorum"*, ed. by Sidney J. H. Herrtage, EETS, e.s. 33 (London, 1879), 55.

[33] See David Rundle, *The Renaissance Reform of the Book and Britain: The English Quattrocento* (Cambridge, U.K., 2019); Daniel Wakelin, *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature, 1430–1530* (Oxford, 2007); and the essays gathered in Michele Campopiano and Helen Fulton, eds., *Anglo-Italian Cultural Relations in the Later Middle Ages* (York, 2018), doi:10.1017/9781787441798.

[34] *Works of John Metham*, xi–xii, 145. Nicholas Mann, *Petrarch Manuscripts in the British Isles* (Padua, 1975), items 19 and 20.

[35] Mann, *Petrarch Manuscripts*, 139–42; Michael Wyatt, "Other Petrarchs in Early Modern England," in Martin McLaughlin and Letizia Panizza, with Peter Hainsworth, eds., *Petrarch in Britain: Interpreters, Imitators, and Translators over 700 Years* (Oxford, 2007), 203–16; Edmund Wilson with Daniel Wakelin, eds., *A Middle English Translation from Petrarch's "Secretum"*, Early English Text Society, original series 351 (Oxford, 2018), xv.

36 *Troilus and Criseyde*, I, 400–20. Patricia Thomson, "The 'Canticus Troili': Chaucer and Petrarch," *Comparative Literature* 11 (1959): 313–28, doi:10.2307/1768980, at 319. For more recent and perhaps more appreciative discussion, see William T. Rossiter, *Chaucer and Petrarch* (Cambridge, 2010), 109–31. On Chaucer's suppressions and reformulations during the transmission of Italian literary traditions more broadly, see Karen Elizabeth Gross, "Chaucer's Silent Italy," *Studies in Philology* 109 (2012): 19–44, doi:10.1353/sip.2012.0004.

37 *Anelida and Arcite*, 317–32; *The Book of the Duchess*, 475–86, on which see Butterfield, "Lyric and Elegy," 34–5.

38 *Il canzoniere di Nicolò de' Rossi*, Furio Brugnolo, ed., 2 vols (Padua, 1974, 1977). He also made a few experiments with *cdddcc* sestets (see poems 2 and 148, for example), in which the closing couplet does not introduce a new rhyme sound. To my knowledge, we have no evidence for any reception of de' Rossi's Italian verse in England during Metham's lifetime.

39 "An Obscured Tradition," 375–8, quotation taken from 375–6.

40 *The Medieval New: Ambivalence in an Age of Innovation* (Philadelphia, 2015); the point is demonstrated throughout, but is particularly neatly summarized at 17–18.

41 I take the concept of "aurality" from Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge, U.K., 1996).

42 Metham, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, p. 18. Robertson accepts Page's reading of the significance of these initials. She more accurately describes them as marking two four-line stanzas and a six-line stanza but, confusingly, refers to them as "rubrication": "Rhyme Royal and Romance," 63.

43 Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis, 2000), 85.

44 I build here on Page's helpful account: Metham, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, p. 17.

45 *Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 15–28.

46 *Works of John Metham*, p. xlii.

47 Such patterned stanza-length modulation is rare elsewhere in surviving Middle English verse, but not unknown; see, for example, *NIMEV* 561 / *DIMEV* 924.

48 "Similes We Cure By: The Poetics of Late Medieval Medical Texts," *New Medieval Literatures* 18 (2018): 183–210, doi:10.1017/9781787442047.006.

49 Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 5, 22; Regan, *The Sonnet*, 2–3.

50 Metham, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, pp. 18–19.

51 Robertson, "Rhyme Royal and Romance," 64.

52 I appreciate the force of A. C. Spearing's argument that reading first-person lyrics of this period as sincere outpourings or as dramatic monologues can be narrow and risky: *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford, 2005), 174–210. Indeed, one of the words used of the lyric in the surrounding text, *dyte* (402), is cognate with the French *dit* which fruitfully interests Spearing: *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text* (Notre Dame, 2012), 53–64. The *matryoshka* positioning of this particular lyric within a frame within *Amoryus and Cleopes* seems to me to guard against sincerity or dramatic monologue, however, and when I write of the lyric's "speaker" I mean only the hazy textual figure identified in the frame stanza (385), not any fully-realized persona.

53 Metham, *Amoryus and Cleopes*, pp. 18–19; Robertson, "Rhyme Royal and Romance," 64.

54 "The Problem of John Metham's Prosody," 160–8.

[55] Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text*, 82. Some contrasting examples which do display "repetitive atemporality" are *NIMEV* 380 / *DIMEV* 640, *NIMEV* 650 / *DIMEV* 1065 (sometimes, with little evidence, attributed to Chaucer), *NIMEV* 1305 / *DIMEV* 2180, *NIMEV* 851/11 / *DIMEV* 3485 (in fact a collage of quotations from Lydgate's *Temple of Glas*), *NIMEV* 2311 / *DIMEV* 3733, and *NIMEV* 2567 / *DIMEV* 4071.

56 Jonathan Culler, "Why Lyric?" *PMLA* 123 (2008): 201–6, doi:10.1632/pmla.2008.123.1.201, at 202; Culler adapts this formulation from Alice Fulton, *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry* (Saint Paul, 1999), 7.

57 Tony Davenport, "'Lusty Fresche Galaunts'," in Paula Neuss, ed., *Aspects of Early English Drama* (Cambridge, U.K., 1983), 111–28; Malcolm Godden, "Fleshly Monks and Dancing Girls: Immorality in the Morality Drama," in Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone, eds., *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray* (Oxford, 1997), 205–28, at 207; Godden and Davenport appear to have arrived at this finding independently of each other. See Metham's adjectives at 354, 374 380 and 402 for more emphasis on the youthfulness of Amoryus and his companions.

58 *MED*, *s.v.* "amorous adj.". For *amor hereos* see *Canterbury Tales*, I 1374 (a line which readers noted in the margin in at least two copies: Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Dd.iv.24, f. 19[r], and Oxford, Trinity College, MS 49, f. 18[r]), and Lydgate's *Fabula duorum mercatorum* in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, Part II: Secular Poems*, Henry Noble MacCracken, ed., EETS o.s. 192 (London, 1934), 336.

59 Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald, "Introduction," in Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald, eds., *Thinking Medieval Romance* (Oxford, 2018), 1–12, at 3; Ingham, *The Medieval New*, 117–39; Fumo, "John Metham's 'Straunge Style'," 227–28, 231–2.

60 The conventional is not uninteresting: see Rory G. Critten, "Bourgeois Ethics Again: The Conduct Texts and the Romances in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61," *Chaucer Review* 50 (2015): 108–33, doi:10.5325/chaucerrev.50.1-2.0108, and the past scholarship addressed there.

61 "John Metham's 'Straunge Style'," 231.

[62] *Old English and Middle English Poetry* (London, 1977), pp. 220–1.

63 No doubt more remains to be written on inset lyric in particular; for recent work which helps to point the way (in a collection of similarly fine essays), see Elizabeth Robertson, "Lyric Interventions in *Troilus and Criseyde*," in Julia Boffey and Christiana Whitehead, eds., *Middle English Lyrics: New Readings of Short Poems* (Cambridge, U.K., 2018), 174–88.

[64] "Poems without Contexts," *Essays in Criticism* 29 (1979): 6–32, doi:10.1093/eic/xxix.1.6.

65 *Lyric Tactics: Poetry, Genre, and Practice in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 2017), 12–18.

[66] For useful landmarks see Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?" *PMLA* 122 (2007): 558–69, doi:10.1632/pmla.2007.122.2.558, updated and expanded in *Thinking through Poetry: Field Reports on Romantic Lyric* (Oxford, 2018), 140–65, doi: 10.1093/oso/9780198810315.001.0001; and Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown, eds., *Reading for Form* (Seattle, WA, 2006). For Middle English studies specifically see Seth

Lerer, "The Endurance of Formalism in Middle English Studies," *Literature Compass* 1 (2003): ME 1–15, doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2004.00006.x; and Helen Marshall and Peter Buchanan, "New Formalism and the Forms of Middle English Literary Texts," *Literature Compass* 8 (2011): 164–72, doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00792.x. Recent collections include Thomas A. Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld, eds., *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form* (Cambridge, U.K., 2018); Robert J. Meyer-Lee and Catherine Sanok, eds., *The Medieval Literary: Beyond Form* (Cambridge, U.K., 2018). The titles of these collections suggest desires to supersede or undercut form (though the essays within, all worthwhile, might not always reveal the same desires). My argument here suggests that some portion of form— the quiddity which remains observable when a lyric fulfilling the formal criteria of a Shakespearean sonnet was probably not composed as a sonnet—cannot be escaped or compromised.

67 For example, Maura Nolan, "Historicism after Historicism," in Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Frederico, eds., *The Post-Historical Middle Ages* (New York, 2009), 63–85, doi:10.1057/9780230621558_4; Jill Mann, "The Inescapability of Form," in Cristina Maria Cervone and D. Vance Smith, eds., *Readings in Medieval Textuality: Essays in Honour of A. C. Spearing* (Cambridge, U.K., 2016), 119–34.

68 "Why Medieval Lyric?" *ELH* 82 (2015): 319–43, doi:10.1353/elh.2015.0017, at 339.

69 "The 'Canticus Troili': Chaucer and Petrarch," 314.

70 'Opening *The Canterbury Tales*: Form and Formalism in the *General Prologue*', in Thomas A. Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld, eds., *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form* (Cambridge, U.K., 2018), 182–99, doi: 10.1017/9781108147682.010, at 186–7 and 188.

71 O. D. Macrae-Gibson, ed., *The Old English Riming Poem* (Cambridge, U.K., 1983), 59–60; trans. Macrae.

72 *The "Iliad" of Homer, Translated by Mr. Pope*, 6 vols. (London, 1715–20), XXII 275–6.

[73] On rhyme in Old and early Middle English, see the judicious survey in E. G. Stanley, "Rhymes in English Medieval Verse: From Old English to Middle English," in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. by Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron and Joseph S. Wittig (Cambridge, U.K., 1988), 19–54.

[74] *NIMEV* 1526 / *DIMEV* 2573; London, British Library, MS Additional 11814, ff. 4^r–26^r, location and dating f. 25^r; edited in Ewald Flügel, "Eine Mittelenglische Claudian Übersetzung (1445)," *Anglia* 28 (1905): 255–99, 421–38; A. S. G. Edwards, "The Middle English Translation of Claudian's *De consolatu Stilichonis*," in A. J. Minnis, ed., *Middle English Poetry: Texts and Traditions; Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall* (York, 2001), 267–78.

[75] On this choice see Edwards, "The Middle English Translation," 268–70; and Wakelin, *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature*, 70–4.

[76] J. A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, ed. and compiled by Douglas Gray (Oxford, 1986), 31; Elizabeth Solopova, private communication reported in Edwards, "The Middle English Translation," 270n16. As Laura Ashe has recently observed, Orrm might deserve more credit for his inventiveness in various aspects of writing: "The Originality of the *Orrmulum*," *Early Middle English* 1 (2019): 35–54, at 36–7.