

“Middle English Lyrics” by Professor Rudolf

The course on Middle English lyrics, taught by Professor Rudolf, was – in all respects – anything but a usual medieval studies course. Oh no, quite the contrary, or have you ever had a course where you would sit in a circle and were required to write your own song adhering to certain criteria in terms of rhyme and metre and the like?

Have you ever wondered what kinds of songs people would sing back in medieval times? What would they sing about – love, everyday life, nature, religion, sin, or death? And what role did music play back then? Why do people sing, anyway? These questions accompanied us during the whole course, and I firmly believe that we have come as close to finding an answer to them as it was possible during the limited time we were given.

So as to give you an idea of what a typical morning or afternoon session of this amazing course looked like, let us start with our ‘Lyric of the Day’.

‘Hi may cume to mi lef

Bute by the watere.

Wanne me lust slepen

Thanne moti wakie

Wnder is that hi liuie.’

One of us would read out the short lyric, which we would then discuss. But instead of doing the usual, tedious analyses of poetry (iambic pentameter?!), which can kill even the most beautiful poems, we would instead focus on the context and try to imagine a situation in which someone would write such a lyric. How was life back then, and in how far might social conditions or historical events have influenced the unknown author? We did not always arrive at satisfying conclusions, but that was part of the charm this class offered. After all, ‘music is a complex

chain of metaphors', according to Bernstein, and there tends to be a high degree of ambiguity in lyrics (unless they were written by Lady Gaga, that is).

The class would then continue with one or two presentations, either on one of the categories of lyrics (moral, political, love, death...), the performers, or medieval manuscripts. Speaking of which, fancy perusing old books dating back to fourteenth or fifteenth century? We went to the National Library of Scotland and were permitted to intrinsically study some of the earliest editions of Hoccleve's *The Regiment of Princes* and Henryson's *Fables*. This was indubitably one of my personal highlights of the trip.

All in all, this course was by far the most interesting medieval studies course I have yet had the pleasure to take, and I can but warmly recommend it to anyone interested in Middle English literature!

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