Forum

Medieval Lyric

To the Editor:

I'd like to echo Heather Dubrow's praise, in a recent Forum letter, of Ricardo Matthews for drawing attention to the medieval period in the lively current debates in *PMLA* and beyond about lyric in and across history ("Challenges in Contemporary Lyric Theory"; vol. 133, no. 5, Oct. 2018, pp. 1272–74), but I also want to point out several misrepresentations and errors in Matthews's otherwise engaging article "Song in Reverse: The Medieval Prosimetrum and Lyric Theory" (vol. 132, no. 2, Mar. 2018, pp. 296–313). To take an example, in writing of Chaucer's translation of Petrarch's "S'amor non è" ("If no love is") in *Troilus and Criseyde* he states that "Petrarch's stature as a laureate poet [was] unknown in England" (305). But Chaucer himself famously names Petrarch and describes him as "the lauriat poete" in the prologue to The Clerk's Tale (*The Riverside Chaucer*; 3rd ed., Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 137).

Medieval lyric studies is a vast and energetic field, and *medieval lyric* could refer to many cultures and languages, one of the most patchily recorded and piecemeal of which is English. The term *prosimetrum* (mixed verse and prose) is, however, of limited use in any study of lyric. Associated initially with Menippean satire, the term is first used in the Latin Middle Ages by Hugh of Bologna, in the early twelfth century. The great examples of this mixed form are Boethius's *De consolatione Philosophiae* (*Consolation of Philosophy* [sixth century]) and Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (*Marriage of Philology and Mercury* [fifth century]), both of which profoundly influenced many genres of vernacular writing from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries. The powerful spur to creative thinking on late medieval lyric and narrative provided by the *Consolatio* was first detailed by Ernest Hœpffner in his 1908 edition of Guillaume de Machaut's fourteenth-century *Remede de*

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Fortune ("Remedy of Fortune" [*Œuvres de Guillaume de Machaut*, 3 vols., Société des Anciens Textes Français, Firmin-Didot, 1908, vol. 2, pp. xix–xxxii]). But to equate the prosimetrum with any work that combines narrative and lyric (where the formal distinction between prose and verse is subsumed to these more nebulous categories) would be a little like equating the epistolary novel with all novels—such a move would entail the loss of many kinds of discrimination and attention to the mysterious processes of literary history. Matthews's assertion that"[t]he prosimetrum, in other words, represents a confluence of ideas from competing theories of the lyric in one, multigeneric form" is hard to connect to anything that was produced in the medieval period. Sweeping up ten centuries of literary exploration of mixed form into a single term that had a quite specific postclassical context is neither historical nor historically transhistorical, as he maintains in his reply to Dubrow's letter (vol. 133, no. 5, Oct. 2018, pp. 1274–75).

Anglophone scholars in English departments are used to thinking that English has primacy in Western literary history. But, as many point out, from the perspective of global literature this is misleading, as medievalists have long known (even if they haven't always acted upon their knowledge). Medieval lyric in English is a case in point: the great editors Carleton Brown and R. H. Robbins worked between the world wars with around 450 manuscripts to edit a total of 750 items in English that they called lyric, selected from well over two thousand. But England was a trilingual literary culture throughout the Middle Ages (and indeed well beyond), and until the later fourteenth century it was Latin and French that dominated. Brown and Robbins—and indexers after them—distort the notion of insular lyric by behaving as if only the items in English in the trilingual manuscripts counted. Most of the music for fourteenth-century song with English texts was lost or never recorded. We still don't have the tools for studying Anglo-Latin and Anglo-French lyric that exist for English verse, and although two new editions of medieval British music have appeared—*Songs in British Sources, c. 1150–1300* (edited by Helen Deeming, Stainer and Bell, 2013) and *Secular Polyphony, 1380–1480* (edited by David Fallows, Stainer and Bell, 2014)—these provide only a starting point for the analysis and criticism of the songs they contain, leaving open the question of whether myriads of texts for which music has not survived were also sung and performed.

What then does current medieval lyric studies look like? Again, one needs a longer view. In the late 1980s, building on but also turning away from the existing emphasis on song as a standalone item collected in a large chansonnier, pioneering work in French studies by Sylvia Huot, Maureen Boulton, and myself uncovered many French narratives that contained inset songs. The manuscripts were considered not just as vehicles for texts to be edited but as a window into the material book's role in illuminating and articulating literary choices about and conceptual frameworks for text, image, and performance. My own work newly explored the presence of music in many of these manuscripts and the implications of this French practice of interpolated song in narrative for Chaucer. Since then the research on these and other narratives with inset lyrics has exploded, some of it focusing on a single manuscript, author, genre, or location, while other studies have turned to performance, to the figure of the singer, and to voices and voicing, some by investigating at length the rich field of cross-channel exchange across an increasing range of disciplines—especially literature (largely French and English), musicology, and history. It is simply untrue to say, as Matthews does, that "[w]hen lyric is framed by narrative, it calls attention to the singer in ways that scholars of troubadour, trouvère, and *formes fixes* poets, and even lyric theorists, have not considered when thinking about medieval poetry and poetry in general" (309).

I provide this condensed survey to point out that any new work in medieval lyric studies has a full and exciting history of scholarship on which to draw. If this is not acknowledged or understood, then there is a danger not just of reinventing the wheel but of presenting a period in the

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history of lyric studies, in this case medieval, so incompletely that any possible conversation with other periods—Renaissance, nineteenth-century, contemporary—is starting from a poorly understood basis. Our need to understand the present through the past applies just as much to the history of scholarship as it does to the history of literary and musical creation. Matthews has picked up on recent work that has drawn attention to the great potential of medieval lyric studies not just to intervene in but also to reorient lyric studies radically. But any new work needs to be grounded in fact, original research, and accurate reviewing of previous scholarship.

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Reply:

I wish to thank Ardis Butterfield for her response to my analysis of generic experimentation in medieval narratives. Her work, describing a variety of mixed genres, from verse romances with inserted lyrics to polytextual motets, in a musicological and codicological framework, has been groundbreaking. However, the problem with scholarship on narratives with lyric inserts (the focus of my essay) has been the ad hoc nature of its terminology. Since the 1980s, scholars from Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet to Eleanor Johnson have used a variety of terms to describe the same thing. Butterfield, for example, uses qualifiers like "verse with verse," "romans à chansons," "inset verse genres," and "mixed verse-verse narratives" while acknowledging, as she does in her letter, the Latin prosimetrum's influence on French narratives with lyric inserts (*Poetry and Music in Medieval France: From Jean Renart to Guillaume de Machaut*; Cambridge UP, 2002). Ultimately, the problem derives from medieval writers themselves. In the thirteenth-century, *Aucussin et Nicolette*, an anonymous prosimetrum in the alternating verse-prose pattern used by Boethius and Alan of Lille, famously coins the word *cantefable* (sec. 41, line 24) to describe its generic hybridity (edited and translated by Jean Dufournet, GF Flammarion, 1984), while Jakemés's mixed-verse *Chatelain de Coucy* opts for another, *dit* (line 48), an ambiguous word describing the workings of love, poetry, and narration that survived into the fifteenth century (*Le roman du Chatelain de Coucy et de la Dame de Fayel*; edited and translated by Catherine Gaullier-Bougass, Champion, 2009). Other texts from that time, like Jean Renart's *Guillaume de Dole*, simply draw attention to the novelty of mixing verse narration and songs. Since the Latin prosimetrum's influence can be felt not only in prose romances but also in works written entirely in verse, Hugh of Bologna's well-known twelfth-century coinage, *prosimetrum*, seemed more useful than *Aucussin*'s relatively unknown *cantefable*, though the latter term reflects better my broader reading of the genre as narrative and lyric.

The decision to use *prosimetrum* for a variety of formal and generic mixtures in narratives, then, was practical. The prosimetrum as a text mixing prose and verse was already familiar to most readers of *PMLA*. The term also allowed for a way to account for some continuity with the genre's transformation, beginning in the thirteenth century, into an all-verse "variation," mixing verse narratives with inserted lyrics or, in some cases, prose "inserts," as in Machaut's *Voir Dit* ("The True Story"), Christine de Pizan's *Livre du duc des vrais amants* ("The Book of the Duke of the True Lovers"), and even Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. While broadening *prosimetrum*'s strictly formal definition, the essay still relies on qualifying terms like "mixed verse" or "all-verse variation" in keeping with previous nomenclature. Finally, the decision to broaden the term was inspired by Butterfield's example, when she published an insightful article on medieval mixed writing, "*Aucussin et Nicolette* and Mixed Forms in Medieval France," in an essay collection entitled *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, edited by Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (D. S. Brewer, 1997, pp. 67–98).

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The purpose of my essay was to provide a lively account of the way lyric is voiced in narratives appropriate to my francophone and anglophone training in textual analysis and historical rhetoric, while remaining conscious of manuscript contexts and layouts. The prosimetrum as a narrative-lyric dynamic is paramount in my thinking about the genre. Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* showcases a struggle over the purpose of poetry, while the *Tristan en prose*, an Arthurian prosimetrum, responds to the *Lancelot-Grail* with a new focus on the singing knight-musician Tristan. That a mixed-verse *dit* like Machaut's *Fountaine amoureuse* ("Fountain of Love") responds to Lady Philosophy's ultimate disapproval of poetry by transforming her into Venus to endorse the primacy of lyric reinforces a shared literary tradition. Even predominantly prose narratives like Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Dante's *La vita nuova* (*The New Life*) promote poetry's centrality as responding to lived experiences. If my essay was going to rethink notions of poetry and subjectivity, as debated in contemporary lyric theory, then a useful term was needed to bring clarity to the whole.

Any "misrepresentations and errors" are resolved when read in context with those debates. Chaucer's adaptation of Petrarch's sonnet into a hybrid ballade–chant royal, or even a ballade *sans refrains*, refers explicitly to limits accepted in Chaucer's French-based poetic milieu regarding experimentation. Although no manual for English poetry exists, we can infer its horizons from French ones when we focus, as my essay does, on the kinds of English poetry that absorbed French poetic ideas, including the prosimetrum. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was great allowance for experimentation within the *formes fixes* ("fixed forms"), as attested by Chaucer's contemporary Eustache Deschamps, who describes, in *L'art de dictier* ("The Art of Composition"), a series of formal exchanges: the ballade adopting the chant royal's envoy, the chant royal adopting the ballade's refrains. Fifteenth-century poetry manuals contain lists of even more generic transformations, like the double rondeaux or ballade layé (*Recueil d'arts de seconde rhétorique*, edited by Ernst Langlois, Imprimerie nationale, 1902). Chaucer's *Canticus Troili*, however, betrays certain limits to this experimentation. Because Petrarch's vernacular output was unknown to Chaucer's English readers, his stature as a writer of Latin prose—he was crowned "poet laureate" not for his Italian poetry but for his unfinished Latin verse epic *Africa*—could not authorize Chaucer's use of the sonnet form. Roberto Weiss's original assessment of English humanism before the late fifteenth century as an individual rather than institutional or cultural undertaking remains relevant (*Humanism in England during the Fifteenth Century*; Basil Blackwell, 1941). We cannot, then, assume that Chaucer's indisputable knowledge of the *tre corone* ("three crowns"—Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio) was shared by his peers or audience. Chaucer's Clerk is the perfect expression of an English medieval reception of the Italian humanist. Educated at Oxford, where scholastic studies continued to dominate—hence, the "logyk" (line 286) and Aristotelian books in his portrait (295)—the Clerk in his tale professes to know Petrarch the "clerk" (32), that is, the Latin scholar (The Clerk's Tale; *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, Oxford UP, 2008, pp. 137–53). However, his enthusiasm for Petrarch's "rhetorike sweete," which "Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie" ("Illuminated all of Italy with poetry" [32, 33]) clearly refers to his Italian poetry. Finally, Chaucer's reference to "Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete" (31) may reflect not a new humanist idea of poetry but rather, as William Rossiter suggests (*Chaucer and Petrarch*; D.S. Brewer, 2010, p. 109n), his simple familiarity with manuscripts of the *Canzoniere*, since many of the manuscripts open with rubrics, or title headings, repeating the Clerk's epithet perfectly, "Francisci petrarche laureate poete." Even if Chaucer understood the exact meaning of the term *laureate* in the humanist context, his English audience would not, nor would they have understood the incorporation of an unknown lyric genre, the sonnet, into his verse romance.

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