

Oh Come, My Sweetest Lover

A Latin 'women's song' from 11th century Anglo-Saxon England

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Category V

Summary

- Eighth century Carolingian nuns were chastised for writing love songs
- The Exeter Book (10th cen.) contains three poems using the theme of 'women's songs,' although only two are told from the point of view of a woman
- The Cambridge Songs, collected sometime after 1039 but before the Conquest and housed in a Canterbury monastery, give us three more examples, including the mostly-destroyed "V..."
- I hypothesize that Anglo-Saxon nuns in the ninth century would not have been so different from their earlier Carolingian sisters, and later evidence suggests (but does not prove) that similar sentiments could be expressed in verse.
- "V..." has been reconstructed as "Veni, delectisimme"
- It consists of three rhymed couplets and a 'nonsense' refrain.
- I have made a poetic translation
- Nuns were given enough musical training so that they could sing and write hymns
- I have also set the poem to music, following the guidelines set down by Guido of Arezzo (c. 1050)

Overview

Our naughty nun would much rather sing love songs than psalms and hymns. Latin lyrics were known in Anglo-Saxon England, sometimes copied from the Continent and sometimes written by Englishmen schooled in Latin. *The Cambridge Songs* are a collection of golliardic verse which was thought to be learned by an Englishman visiting the Rhineland and then brought home. The latest datable song is c. 1039, placing the collection in the mid-eleventh century. They survive without music (unlike the "later Cambridge Songs" from the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, which do (Colton)). This is a singable translation of the most direct of the 'women's songs' found in the Cambridge Songs, set to original music in a period style.

Women's Songs

All over the world, in many cultures, the genre of "women's songs" can be found. Their central themes are desire and isolation; typically, the woman is the poem's speaker, and she is longing for an absent man (Davidson 453). Anglo-Saxon scholars have long argued that the genre is absent from early England, leading to some rather tortured interpretations of "The Wife's Lament" and "Wulf and Eadwacer," which appear to fit the genre exactly.

Clifford Davidson further explores the presence of the genre in his 1975 article, "Erotic Women's Songs in Anglo-Saxon England." He notes the presence of three such songs in the Cambridge Songs, an eleventh century collection of Continental golliardic works housed in a Canterbury monastery. Whoever copied the songs down and left them to the monastery apparently thought that the genre would hold some interest for the monks therein - perhaps because it was already familiar to them.

V...

The most explicit of these songs was largely blotted out by a scandalized brother, leading Bruel to label it simple "V..." in his transliteration of the *Songs*. Based on what letters remained visible and the requirements of rhyme and scansion, a reconstruction was proposed in 1926 and another in 1968. Letters in square brackets are reconstructions:

Ven[i] d[i]lectissim]e et a et o
gratam me [in]visere, et a et o et a et o
In languore pereo [et a] et [o]
[venerem de]sidero [et a et o et a] et o...
Si cure clave veneris, et a et o,
[mox] intrare poteris et a et o et a et o e.

(Come to me, dearest love.., visit me, and you'll
be pleased I die with desire... I long to make
love If you come with your key.., you will
be able to enter quickly)

Davidson notes: "The reconstructed text is essentially as given by Karl Strecker, ed., *Die Cambridger Lieder* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1926), p. 107, with 'Venerem' in 1.4 added from Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*, 2rid ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), I, 274."

A Rhymed Translation

My Latin is shaky at best, and based mostly on experience with Spanish and Italian. My uncertain opinion is that the lines are seven syllables following a stress pattern of "u / u / u / u," where "u" denotes an unstressed syllable and "/" denotes a stressed one.

Working from the unrhymed translation above, I came up with:

Oh come, my sweetest lover, and ah and oh
What pleasures we'll discover, and ah and oh and ah and oh

I'm dying with desire, and ah and oh
To love-making I aspire, and ah and oh and ah and oh

So with your key come swiftly, and ah and oh
My door will open quickly, and ah and oh and ah and oh

Preserving the sense of the last verse and the meter proved to be too much for my rhyming abilities, and I've taken refuge in a near-rhyme.

I really don't think the refrain "et a et o" is nonsense at all. Assuming "et" should be read as the Latin word for "and," it seems to be onomatopoeia for the sighs and groans of love (or of love-making).

A Musical Score

In his eleventh century treatise on music, *Micrologos*, Guido d'Arezzo provides a long list of guidelines for would-be composers (Babb). These included:

- To use no note more than a step below tonic
- To keep the song within an octave (although a tenth could be acceptable)
- To use one of the approved modes (Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian or Mixolydian), either authentic or plagal
- Notes ending phrases should be a perfect interval (e.g., a fourth, fifth or octave) away from tonic
- One note or several notes may be used per syllable, and it is good to use both techniques

The original music for the song is in authentic Dorian mode. The unornamented melody is largely contained within an octave from D to d, with two dips down to that step below tonic Guido mentions (C). Phrases end on the fifth or at unison with tonic, and there is a combination of single notes per syllable and several.

Less easily documented: Gregorian chant has a very rolling feel to it, with the melodic contour moving up and down around the reciting tone (A in this case) in small steps (generally seconds, sometimes larger steps). I've tried to recreate this in the piece. However, I admit that my acquaintance with chant is cursory. I think the present music sounds better than my first version (which sounded like a broadside ballad) but I'm not sure it really sounds like chant.

Performance

Vocal production for early music is, like many aspects of early music performance, up for debate. But most scholars and performers working in the area agree on a natural voice production (as opposed to classical, opera-style singing), using the head voice, placed forward in the mouth, with clear tones. Tuning and temperment (how scales are tuned) are also important issues, especially for ensembles, but I will readily admit that my modern brain/ear cannot sing in Pythagorean temperment. The amount of emotion which should be projected is also up for debate; the singers of Anonymous 4 prefer some emoting while Gothic Voices insists that the text, not the music or the performance, carry all the emotional weight. Given certain medieval clerical injunctions against self-aggrandizing virtuoso singing, I think that for a non-ensemble, secular performance, some emotion is justified.

To instrument or not to instrument? I am aware of no evidence that Anglo-Saxon women played upon any instruments. Scops and gleomen, the professional performers of court and camp, used rounded Germanic lyres, but we have no evidence that women played these instruments. A few centuries later, we have women playing harps scattered all throughout Arthurian romances; we first begin to see depictions of the triangular harp in the ninth century, at the end of the conversion era in Anglo-Saxon England.

A gender-blind performance might make use of a lyre. A harp is a tentative possibility, although there is nothing beyond speculation to support such a performance. But *a capella* singing is perfectly reasonable by current early music standards, and that is what I have done.

Resources

Babb, Warren, trans. *Hucbald, Guido and John on Music: Three Medieval Treatises*. Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1978.

Bruel, Karl. *The Cambridge Songs: A goliard's songbook of the eleventh century*. Cambridge University Press, 1915.

Colton, Lisa. "The earliest songbook in England (review)", *Early Music* 2005 33(4):707-708.

Davidson, Clifford. "Erotic Women's Songs in Anglo-Saxon England." *Neophilologus* 59, (1975), 451-462.