

Poem 4: Two Stanzas (possibly by a woman?)

As in yow resstyth my joy and comfort,
Your dissese ys my mortal payne;
Sone God send me seche reporte
That may comfort myn hert in every vayne.
5 Who but ye may me sustayne,
Or of my gref be the remedye,
But ye sone have amendment of yowre maledy,

Weche ys to me the heviest remembraunce
That ever can be thouth in any creature?
10 Myne hert hanggyng thus in balaunce
Tyle I have knowledge and verely sure
That God in yow hath lyst done thys cure,
Of yowre dysse to have allygaunce,
And to be releuyd by all yowre grevaunce.

[Because my joy and comfort is found in you, your illness is my own deadly pain; may God soon send me such news that will comfort every part of my heart. Who but you can preserve my life, or be the remedy for my sorrow, unless you quickly recover from your disease, which is the most painful thought which can ever be thought by any living person? My heart thus hanging in the balance until I receive news and are truly sure that God has chosen to cure you, so that you have relief from your illness, and that you are recovered from all your sickness.]

Context: This poem by an anonymous poet is found in a manuscript called the Findern manuscript. This manuscript, a collection of poetry, was owned by a Derbyshire family in the fifteenth century. Some of the people who copied poems into the manuscript are likely to have been women, copying texts for entertainment and amusement. Several critics have speculated that this poem was written by a woman about her husband's illness.

You can see a picture of pages from the manuscript here:

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/library/exhibitions/authorship/cabinet2-1.html>

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Medieval poets recognised being in love meant that the lover was in an extreme state. It's not very romantic if one is only 'a bit in love' – love has to be dramatic and intense. Medieval poets often wrote about love using hyperbole, a figure of speech in which exaggerated or extravagant statements are used to convey strong emotions. They used superlatives (for example *most blisfully*, *sorrowfullest*), adverbs or adjectives in the grammatical form which expressed the highest degree of a certain quality. Strong emotions were thought to be physically dangerous, and it was considered entirely possible that a lover could die from love or from grief for the loss of a loved one. Because of this physical danger, medical language was often used to describe both the pain of love and the remedies which could be provided for the anguish of lovesickness. Male poets often called their lady their 'doctor' or 'medicine', because the lady's presence or acceptance of their love could alleviate their pain.

Questions to think about:

- What is the relationship between the 'I' (the speaker) and the 'you' (the addressee) in this poem? How does the speaker relate to the addressee?
- Look at how the author of these stanzas repeats a number of pronouns (*I, me, my; you, ye, your*). How do these repeated and paralleled pronouns explain the reciprocal relationship between the well-being of both speaker and addressee?
- Here we seem to have a loved one who is ill himself or herself, rather than being the lover's doctor. There are thus two types of illness here – the illness of the addressee and the lovesickness of the speaker. How does the speaker use medical language to describe these illnesses? Whose illness is described using medical language?
- What is the difference between the speaker's disease and the addressee's illness?

Form, Structure and Language:

- How does the author of the poem use hyperbole to characterise his or her feelings?
- If you look at this poem's meter, you will see that it does not have a regular pattern of alternation between weakly stressed and strongly stressed syllables. This gives it a more natural, less slick and artificial feeling, though it is hard to read smoothly in places. Choose a line that interests you and try out several ways of reading it, trying out putting stress on different words. Which words could you stress as you read the line?
- How does the poet make use of enjambment in this poem, both between lines and between stanzas? How does this enact the speaker's state of mind?