A common criticism of the medieval religious lyric is illustrated by George Kane's statement that, although by itself one of these poems may seem good, when studied with specimens of its own kind, the religious lyric seems to recede into a common sameness of theme and effect. This is in the first place, Kane says, because the number of themes is limited. Then, the variations of these are minute, and the degrees of "poetic transport" are not great. The limited number of themes and the few signs of developing technique except as it reflects the progress in the secular lyrics, confirm "a suggestion there implicit of the static nature of this particular combination of medium and subject which the few exceptions fail to dismiss."  

In answer to this common criticism of the medieval religious lyric, and as a bare suggestion of the variety possible in the treatment of one dogmatic theme, I would like to discuss two other poems which treat the conception and birth of Christ. These are the thirteenth century "Exemplum de beata virgine & gaudiis eius," which begins "Nu þis fules singet hand maket hure blisse," and the late fourteenth century poem which is based on it, "I syng of a myden þat is makeles."  

Fig. 4.—The Birth of Christ and the Tree of Jesse. Illuminated "P" of the Introit, Third Mass on Christmas Day, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library M. 107, fol. 23. Christ's birth is presented in the context of Christ's kingship. The folio shows a triple focus: on the present feast of Christmas, as it is the fulfillment of the past, and also the means of union with Christ and His mother who reign in heaven. For more extended discussion, refer to the Notes to the Illustrations.

47
"Nu Þis Fules Singet hand Maket Hure Blisse"

Leo Spitzer refers to the first of these two poems on the “maiden makeles” as “quite mediocre.” Using the words of W. W. Greg who pointed out their relationship, he says: “The ‘not very remarkable’ thirteenth-century version is a quite traditional poem about the Annunciation, including a mention of the tree of Jesse, a transcription of the *Ave Maria* and a prayer at the end.” In this brief description of the poem, Spitzer simply lists three traditional theological subjects, implying by this listing that the poet has related them in a similar mechanical way. I believe that Spitzer’s opinion that this poem is an ununified collection of traditional concepts comes from a misunderstanding of the purpose of the poem, which in turn arises from a misunderstanding of the theological subject behind it. My intention in explicating this poem will be not to decide whether or not it is a “remarkable poem,” but to show that a unified purpose and structure can be found by studying its theological subject matter, and also to provide a background for a discussion of its later offspring, “I syng of a myden þat is makeles.”

*Exemplum de beata virgine & gaudiis eius*

Nu þis fules singet hand maket hure blisse
and þat gres up þringet and leued þe ris;
of on ic wille singen þat is makeles,
þe king of halle kinges to moder he hire ches.  

Heo his wit-uten sunne and wit-uten hore,
I-cumen of kinges cunne of gesses more;
þe louerd of monkinne of hire was yboren
to bringen us hut of Sunne, elles wue weren for-lore.  

Gabriel hire grette and saide hire, “auel!
Marie ful of grace, vre louer be uit þe,
þe frut of þire wombe ibleset mot id be.
þu sal go wit chide, for sout ic suget þe.”

and þare gretinke þat angle hauede ibrout,
he gon to bi-þenchen and meinde hire þout;
he saide to ben angle, “hu may tiden his?
of monnes y-mone nout y nout iuis.”

Mayden heo was uid childe & Maiden her biforen, & maiden ar sot-hent hire chid was iboren; Maiden and moder nas neuer non wimon boten he— wel mitte he berigge of godes sune be.

I-blessed beo hat suete chid & he moder ec, & he suete broste hat hire sone sec; I-hered ibe he time hat such chid uas iboren, hat lesed al of pine hat arre was for-lore.

Even though one section includes part of the Gospel on the annunciation, it is imprecise to say that this is a poem about the annunciation. Because our last poem developed the events in the Gospel account, it could be also designated as a poem on the annunciation, yet it was, more specifically, a poem invoking and defining Mary as the medium of God’s coming and therefore the medium of man’s deliverance from pain and of man’s entry into heaven. The defining of the tree of Jesse and what Spitzer calls the Ave Maria are two aspects of the unified conception of the poem, which describes Mary not as the medium of our salvation, but as unique because she is the mother of God. The purpose of the poet’s address to her is not petition as in the previous poem, but praise.

The poem moves in three stages. The first, stanzas one and two, defines the setting and the subject of praise, the “makeles” one chosen by the King to be His mother, and it proposes the first paradox, that a child might choose his own mother. The second, stanzas three and four, tells of the annunciation and proposes the second paradox, that a virgin might conceive without man, and asks how this might be. And the third, the last two stanzas, shows that what lies behind the paradoxes is cause for giving praise to God.

The opening stanza of the poem might be said to be merely a friar’s adaptation of a conventional beginning of a secular love song, used perhaps to capture the audience’s attention, or perhaps to identify a secular melody to which the poem might be set. Yet the opening serves a purpose more integral to the poem. By classifying Mary conventionally, with all other women who come to mind to be praised in the spring season of love, it
establishes the way her identity will be handled. The subject of the poem will be one that is matchless, a woman unequaled by all other women. Neither the mother nor her Child will be directly identified, and the unique fact that her King and Child is God will be withheld until line twenty. By speaking of Mary and her Child as comparable to all mankind, the poet can heighten the effect of the paradoxes in the conception and birth of God and heighten, in turn, the listeners’ feeling of wonder.

But we cannot expect that the audience was unaware that Mary was the subject of the poem. In fact, in stanza one it can be seen that the poet already plays on his listeners’ knowledge of the full identity of Mary and Christ by implying the present situation of events in sacred history, and we shall see in the last stanza that the event of Christ's birth is the basis of praise. Christ would be recognized by the title, “king of halle kinges,” as He is now, in glory with the Father. And Christ would be recognized in the paradoxes. This King chose the “makeles” one not only, as the love lyric context would suggest to the listener, to be His spouse, but to be His mother. What child has chosen his mother? What mother is at the same time a spouse? Mary herself would be recognized as the mother of the King of Kings, and also as she is in present time, after her bodily assumption, the Queen of Heaven. It is from this perspective in the present time of sacred history that the poet takes his listeners back into past time to recall the nature of this mother’s matchlessness.

Heo his wit-uten sunne and wit-uten hore,
I-cumen of kinges cunne of gesses more;
þe louerd of monkinne of hire was yboren
to bringen us hut of Sunne, elles wue weren for-lore.

The “on . . . þat is makeles” is a fit choice for a king. She is sinless and without stain. Not only is she sinless, but she comes of a kingly line. With the mention of Jesse’s root, again the poet calls on his listeners’ knowledge of Mary’s place in sacred history. In the lessons and antiphons of Christmas and Advent and in the Masses celebrating the nativity of Mary, the liturgy applies to Mary’s giving birth to Christ Isaiah’s prophecy of the Messiah:

And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse: and a flower shall rise up out of the root (Isa. 11:1).
Developing the implication of the last line in stanza one, the last two lines of stanza two give the central reason why the King of Kings chose this mother. Mary's beauty is seen to be the result of God's design in sacred history to redeem man. The "louerd of monkinne"—now named from the point of view of His humanity—was born of her, the sinless one, to bring man out of sin; otherwise man had been lost. Having given the purpose of the King's entry into time, the poet then tells of the moment itself when the King's choice of the matchless one to be His mother was announced to her:

Gabriel hire grette and saide hire, "aue!
Marie ful of grace, vre louer be uit þe,
þe frut of þire wombe ibleset mot ðid be.
þu sal go wit chide, for sout ic suget þe."

Using the Gospel account of the annunciation, the poet modifies it for the purposes of his poem. As in "Gabriel, fram evene-king," the angel combines his salutation to Mary with his announcement of the birth. But in this poem, "þe frut of þire wombe ibleset mot ðid be" is substituted for the Gospel lesson's "blessed art thou among women." This is the blessing given to Mary, after her conception of Christ, by Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1:39-47), which in Mary's feasts the liturgy traditionally couples with the angel's salutation. By substituting for the angel's blessing of Mary herself the blessing of the fruit of her womb, the poet puts greater emphasis on Mary's coming motherhood to heighten the paradox of Mary's virginity, which will be presented for the first time in the next stanza. The poet also, as he does throughout the poem, omits the Gospel's identification of the matchless one's Child with the Messiah.

The fourth stanza establishes Mary's virginity. As in "Gabriel, fram evene-king," Mary searches her thought, not troubled by the greeting as in the Gospel account, but about the impossibility of her conceiving without having known man. Yet after her question, "hu may tiden þis?/ of monnes y-mone nout y nout iuis," the account breaks off. By withholding the angel's answer, the poet gives emphasis to Mary's question.

Stanzas five and six, the third section, reach a climax of paradox, give the solution to it, and complete the purpose of praise.

Mayden heo was uid childe & Maiden her biforen,
& maiden ar sot-hent hire chid was iboren;
THE ANNUNCIATION AND BIRTH OF CHRIST

Maiden and moder nas neuer non wimon boten he—
wel mitte he berigge of godes sune be.

This mother remained a maid after she had conceived, as well as before, and
a maid after her Child was born. No other woman has been maiden and
mother but she. Well might she be the bearer of God's Son. The last line of
stanza five suggests a double truth. Since her fitness has been the theme of
the poem, line twenty seems at first glance to mean that this unique fact
makes her a fitting mother of the Son of God. But seen as the resolution of
the two paradoxes, that a child chooses his mother, that a mother remains a
virgin, her matchlessness serves also as a sign that the Child she bore is God.
God only could choose His mother. God only could cause a virgin to
conceive without her knowing man, and God only could be born without
disturbing her virginity. Her Son then must be God.

I-blessed beo þat suete chid & þe moder ec,
& þe suete broste þat hire sone sec;
I-hered ibe þe time þat such chid uas iboren,
þat lesed al of pine þat arre was for-lore.

In this last stanza, the poet fulfills the purpose of praising the matchless
mother, and applies to Mary the words of a third blessing given to her
during the Gospel account of Christ's ministry and traditionally applied to
her by the liturgy which celebrates her queenship of heaven. Then in the
second two lines of the stanza, the praise reaches beyond Mary to the full
meaning in sacred history of her motherhood. Referring back to line eight
where the purpose of the King's birth was given, the last two lines speak of
the purpose as fulfilled. Christ has been born, man redeemed. The praise
extends beyond the mother and Child to the moment itself when such a
Child was born, Who loosed all, who before were lost, from pain.

The indirect mode used to refer to Mary in the opening stanza is retained
significantly in the last. In the same way as Mary was called "on . . . þat is
makeles," the three elements praised in this stanza are identified solely in
terms of their relation to the event of the coming of the unique Child. The
Child is praised first as "þat . . . chid"; the mother as the mother of that
Child, "þe moder ec." Time itself is praised only because of its relationship to
the birth of that unique Child, "I-hered ibe þe time þat such chid uas
iboren." Finally, in the last two lines, even the Child Himself, identified in
stanza five as “godes sune,” is made relative to the purpose of His birth, as He is named “such chid.” And the whole chain of praise, of the mother, the time, the Child, is made to spring from gratitude for the redemption of mankind.

The rhyme “iboren” and “for-lore[n]” is repeated at three important points in the poem, possibly to emphasize the final focus I have suggested. It occurs at the end of the first section, lines seven and eight, with the mention of the purpose of the birth, which sets the King of Kings and His mother in the context of sacred history. In lines seventeen and eighteen the rhyme is repeated. These are the lines in which the poem’s paradoxes culminate, as the poet presents Mary’s virgin motherhood. And, finally, the rhymes are repeated in the last stanza, where the verb form, modified from emphasizing a general purpose, “to bringen us hut of Sunne,” presents the fact as fulfilled, “hat lesed al of pine.”

The heading of this poem, “Exemplum de beata virgine & gaudiis eius,” indicates the poem may have been used in a sermon, as does the fact that the poem is found in a miscellany of English, French and Latin works, compiled probably by Dominican preaching friars in the second half of the thirteenth century. The joys on which the poem is based are the first two of five joys traditionally celebrated in medieval England (see Part III). Mary’s joys—the annunciation, the birth of Christ, the resurrection and ascension, and Mary’s own assumption—reflect the steps of man’s redemption, and Mary’s final joy of being bodily in heaven is the promise of man’s final joy.

For the particular combination of images used to describe Mary in this poem, two sources can be seen. One is the concept of the tree of Jesse as formulated by the medieval artist, and the other, as was mentioned above, is the liturgy’s celebration of Mary in her present joy as Queen of Heaven. The concept of the tree of Jesse began to have a traditional artistic form in the late eleventh and early twelfth century. In stained glass windows and in illuminated manuscripts depicting the tree, the artist would show at the bottom of the representation Jesse lying asleep, and springing up from him, a tree on which the prophets and kings were arranged. (See Figure 4.) At the top would be Christ in majesty, the flower of the tree. Mary would be below Him as the stem of the flower. Later, beginning with the thirteenth century and the upsurge in devotion to Mary, the tree was often conceived with Mary enthroned and the Christ Child in her lap. Occasionally, grouped at the bottom of the representation, would be some of the events in the life of Mary, such as the annunciation and birth of Christ, the presentation in the Tem-
Many of the elements in the artistic conception of the tree of Jesse are in this poem—the representation of Christ as the King of Kings, of Mary as Queen and mother of Christ, the mysteries of Christ's birth.

Some of the concepts in the poem can be found also in the daily Masses and Offices devoted to Mary in the spring and summer season. The Mass used from the Purification on February second to the beginning of Advent, with the exception of Easter week, celebrates Mary’s timeless aspect, as she is in present time, Queen of Heaven, with the angel’s prophecy of her blessedness now fulfilled. The Introit of the Mass is “Hail, holy mother, who didst bring forth in childbirth the king who ruleth over heaven and earth for ever and ever. Ps. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” The Gospel lesson is Luke 11:27-28, the source of lines twenty-one and two of this poem, which tells about the woman crying out from the crowd to bless the mother of Christ.

I would like briefly to refer back to Spitzer’s summary of “Nu þis fules singet hand maket hure blisse” as a “traditional poem about the Annunciation, including a mention of the tree of Jesse, a transcription of the Ave Maria and a prayer at the end.” My purpose is not to put an undue amount of weight on a description which Spitzer obviously sketched in to provide the basis of his detailed study of the poem derived from it, but to find fault with what seems to be the attitude of Spitzer, and of Kane also, that when certain “traditional” themes or forms appear they must necessarily each be about a limited subject or have a certain static relationship to each other.

“Nu þis fules singet hand maket hure blisse” is, in fact, not a poem on the annunciation, but a poem in praise of Mary as mother and virgin because she is a sign of the redemption of man. Her qualities are conceived in their timeless aspect, as she is now, the Queen of Heaven. The poem defines her matchlessness by recalling the past events of her life which have made her unique, and from the definition of her beauty rises the praise in the last stanza. There is no “transcription of the Ave Maria,” but the angel’s salutation combined with Elizabeth’s greeting is introduced into the narrative of the annunciation as part of the definition of Mary’s virgin motherhood. The angel’s salutation is later developed by the third salutation in stanza five from Luke 10. All three salutations, as they do in the liturgy, emphasize the theme of her blessedness. How the poet modifies the account from that in the Gospel further illustrates that the subject of the poem is not directly the annunciation, but Mary’s special quality of virgin motherhood. The poet’s reference to Mary springing from the root of Jesse is an integral part of his
demonstration that she is fit to be the mother of the King, and at the same
time it introduces the human lineage of her Son, Who, until the end of the
poem, is presented explicitly only in His human nature. And finally, the
“prayer at the end” grows from the purpose of praise which was announced
at the beginning and which was carefully prepared for by means of the entire
poem.

“I Syng of a Myden Ṫat Is Makeles”

“I syng of a myden Ṫat is makeles” is the counterpart of the poem which is
its source. This poem also praises Mary for her unique quality of being
virgin and mother. In the same way as in “Nu Ṫis fules singet,” Christ is
presented as the King of Kings and Mary is called “makeles”;
Mary’s identity is withheld until the end, and the revelation that she is “godes
moder” gives the purpose and direction of the poem. However, in this poem,
instead of being introduced in general terms as the “on . . . Ṫat is makeles,”
Mary is spoken of immediately, in line one, as the “myden Ṫat is makeles.”
Eliminating other aspects of Mary’s beauty, the poet focuses solely on the
quality of Mary’s virgin motherhood. It is this great concentration and the
poet’s use of imagery that has made this poem, contrary to its source, appeal
unanimously to the readers of our time.³⁸

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I syng of a myden } & Ṫat \text{ is makeles,} \\
\text{kyng of alle kynges } & \text{to here sone che ches.} \\
\text{he cam also stylle } & \text{Þer his moder was} \\
& \text{as dew in apryll, } \text{Þat fallyt on Þe gras.} \\
\text{he cam also stylle } & \text{to his moderes bowr} \\
& \text{as dew in aprille, } \text{Þat fallyt on Þe flour.} \\
\text{he cam also stylle } & \text{Þer his moder lay} \\
& \text{as dew in aprille, } \text{Þat fallyt on Þe spray.} \\
\text{moder & mayden } & \text{was neuer non but che—} \\
\text{wel may swych a lady } & \text{godes moder be.}
\end{align*}
\]
The first poem begins with the King of Kings choosing the maiden to be His mother and tells of the angel's announcement and Mary's question. However, omitting any account of the annunciation, this shorter poem begins (lines 1-2) with the fact of Mary's acceptance of the King of Kings to be her son. This beginning has the effect of transferring the sovereign choice which in the last poem was the King’s to Mary in this poem, and Mary’s choice initiates the movement of the poem. The rest of the poem develops the result of her choice, describing the quality of the King's response to it. He came to her as still as the dew in April, so still that while she became His mother, she remained a virgin. No other woman has had this unique prerogative. Well may such a lady be the mother of God.

What has been modified or omitted from the earlier version is a result of this poem's concentration on the single event in sacred history, the actual coming of the King. Omitted is direct reference to Mary’s quality of sinlessness, to her descent from the tribe of Jesse, to the fact that the King’s coming was to release man from sin and punishment. Instead, the poet develops the manner of the King's conception and birth, and by using several comparisons suggests the qualities of the “myden” through whom He was born. The context of sacred history is present by implication only, as the comparisons the poet chooses have their associations in liturgical and exegetical tradition.

But is there any creature—except perhaps her who alone merited to have in herself this most blessed experience—is there, I ask, any creature capable of comprehending with his intellect or of discerning by his reason how the inaccessible Splendour of the Godhead poured Itself into the Virgin's womb, and how of that small portion of her body which It animated and united hypostatically to Itself, It made a shadow, as it were, for her whole being, in order that she might be able to endure the approach and the presence of such intolerable brightness?  

Among the possible denotations of the adverb “stylle” in Middle English, three are useful to us here. The most evident meaning is that He came without noise or commotion, quietly, silently. “Stylle” might even connote a sense of motionlessness, to suggest that the King disturbed or changed nothing in the maiden with His coming. “Stylle” could also mean “secretly.” If we think of the homilist and of St. Bernard's words above, this could suggest that He came mysteriously in a manner hidden to human reason; or
if we think of the secular love song context, it could suggest that He came secretly, as a lover would steal to his lady's bower. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries "still" (from Latin *destillare*) was used as a verb, meaning to trickle down or fall in minute drops, so that in these lines which compare His coming to the falling of dew, "style" by a play on words could reinforce the comparison.

"He cam also style... as dew in apryule," the secular love setting of spring in "Nu his fules singet" is adapted in this poem to suggest fertility, the freshness of April rain that brings growth. But more fundamental are the associations with liturgical tradition, which, especially in Advent and on the Feast of the Annunciation, applies to the conception and birth of the Messiah the Old Testament figures of falling dew. Such is the passage from Isaiah, which contains all the connotations of fertility present in the poem and which was used as the Introit for the Feast of the Annunciation: "Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth open, and bring forth a saviour" (Isa. 45:8). A second figure of falling dew was applied by the Office during Advent and on the Annunciation to the conception and birth of Christ. This is the figure from Judges 6:34-40 of the dew falling on Gideon's fleece, which was used also in the Prymer's antiphon for Prime: "Whanne he was born wundurfulliche of a maide, þanne was fulfillid holi writ. þou cam doun as reyn in-to a flees, for to make saaf mankynde." In the selection of antiphons and especially in the sequences, these two figures were associated by the liturgy with the flowering of the rod of Jesse.

But this poem is very unlike "Nu his fules singet" in the way it uses traditional sources. Here the traditional attributes of Mary are not presented by narration, but by suggestion and association only, and the poem develops, as a modern poem might, by a series of accumulating associations. The simile of falling dew is repeated, with an incremental effect, three times, and each time the poet develops the simile so that it reveals an aspect of the delicacy and beauty of her to whom Christ came.

First, with each repetition of "he cam also style," the poet indicates the nature of the place to which the King came. In line three it is presented as unspecified and without connotations: He came so quietly "þer his moder was." But in line five, the place is made more concrete: He came "to his moderes bowr," as a lover to her secret place. "Bowr" in its general sense denoted an inner room, a chamber or bedroom, and was especially applied to a lady's private apartment. It was also used figuratively to refer to Mary's
This suggestion that Christ came as a lover would stir associations of the liturgy used during the summer months for Mary's feasts, where images from the Canticle of Canticles were applied to her—Mary was "my sister, my spouse," "a garden enclosed."  

In the third repetition, line seven, the King is seen to come closer to Mary's person, to "her his moder lay." Being used to the many representations of the nativity in painting after the Council of Trent, one is apt to overlook that the thirteenth and fourteenth century manuscript illumination and sculpture of the nativity represented Mary as reclining. We see this, for example, in the nativity scene from the Tiptoft Missal (Figure 4). In the early fourteenth century East Anglian Psalter of Robert de Lisle (Figure 5), Mary is represented at the bottom of the illumination resting on a couch. Joseph sits beside her. Above her the Christ Child is lying on a box-like, altar-like cradle. Mary looks down and away from the Child. Above Christ are the ox and the ass and above them the star. Joseph, the Christ Child and the others look to the star. Another example of Mary reclining at the birth of Christ is included in a series of scenes around the tree of Jesse from the Gorleston Psalter, which is also early fourteenth century East Anglian.  

The place the King came to is developed more profoundly by the second part of the simile, the figure used for the place upon which the dew falls. Each figure seems to refer to Mary herself, so that in the three repetitions she is compared to the "gras," the "flour," and then the "spray." Besides its connotations in nature of fertility and delicacy, "gras" also has traditional liturgical associations with the Feast of the Annunciation, where it is used in a Vespers antiphon: "Orietur sicut sol Salvator mundi: et descendet in uterum virginis sicut ymber super gramen." As well as the many applications of "flour" to Mary in art, from the great rose windows of the cathedrals to the lily of virginity traditionally present in illuminations and paintings of the annunciation "flour" suggests again the liturgy's use of the Canticle of Canticles in relation to Mary: "I am the flower of the field, and the lily of the valleys. As a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters." In Middle English the word "spray" meant the small slender twigs of trees or shrubs and more particularly, in the early fifteenth century, a single twig. Because the poem is based on "Nu þis fules singet," and because of the liturgical association of Mary's descent from "gesses more" with her maiden motherhood, the readers of this poem have in general interpreted "spray" to refer to the blooming rod of Jesse.  

Thus in this accumulation of associations about the place to which the
“kyng of alle kynges” came it is possible to see simultaneously in the King’s coming both the coming of Christ to Mary in His conception by the Holy Spirit and the coming of Christ into the world at His birth. The poem can be read to describe either event. If we think of the poem so that the falling dew refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit, in the threefold repetition we see Him approach closer and closer to the mother—to the place, to her bower, to herself. Just as tradition sees in the fleece of Gideon a type of Mary’s virginity, so the growing things on which the dew falls, “þe gras,” “þe flour,” “þe spray,” can be seen to develop the same traditional application to Mary. On the other hand, if we read the series of developing figures as referring to the painless giving birth to Christ, we see Christ transforming the nature of His presence as He comes, from being the King, to being the Child of the maiden, Who comes to the place beside her, “þer his moder lay.” The figures of the grass, the flower, the spray still suggest His conception and emphasize the delicacy and beauty of Mary, which remain inviolate.

In their analyses of “I syng of a myden þat is makeles,” both Spitzer and Kane suggest that there is an inherent opposition between poetry and dogma. They believe this particular poem succeeds because it has moved beyond dogma to poetry, or, in Spitzer’s words, beyond “the burden of Biblical lore. . . . We may conclude then that the simile of the dew, even though inspired by dogmatic literature, has been relived by this extraordinary poet who was able to give the pristine beauty of nature to a venerable scriptural concept.”

Kane defines the opposition in terms of a contrast he finds between religious emotion or theology and the imagination. In the body of the poem (lines 3-8):

Not the intellect but the imagination is invoked, required to comprehend the magnitude of the contrast between the greatness of the “kyng of alle kynges” and the silence of his arrival in “his moderes bowr” . . . A great restraint is imposed in this part of the poem; there are no superlatives, no expressions of the poet’s own emotion, no intrusions of his personality. The emphatic statement is reserved for the last stanza, which returns to the theme of the first, the maiden’s matchlessness and the reason for it. Out of this assertion the plain words of that last stanza, tremendous in their implications, create a climax that is intensified not only by the theology of the doctrine and the faith that enlivens it, but also by the emotions, aesthetic and personal,
which the imaginative portion of the poem have excited. . . . The Maiden Makeles is, in my opinion, an instance of the ideal religious lyric, that farthest removed from the expression of homely or doctrine or devotion with tags and tricks of poetry attached to it.  

It seems to me that by assuming the distinction between the opening and closing sections of the poem and the central section to be that of intellect and imagination, Kane separates the poem into three "themes," whereas the poem is actually a unified conception explaining why the maiden is "makeles." The imagination is used in all three sections. In the first, it is used to consider the quality of the maid and her choice, and the power and implications of the King of Kings Whom the listener identifies as a figure for Christ in majesty as contrasted to Christ the son of one of His creatures. In the second, the listener considers a fact which is the result and purpose of the rest and yet which is itself a sign of the literal identity of the King and the maiden. To discover this is all a use of the imagination, which associates the figures with the truth being related in the poem. The main difference between the opening and closing sections and the central part of the poem is that by the poet’s repeating yet varying a series of figures, in the central part of the poem the delight the listeners’ senses feel in their proportion and variety is perhaps more intense. Yet to isolate this section from the total context would be to cut the delight off from its total reflection of the beauty of the mystery of the virgin birth, which gives the section its meaning and larger purpose.

The modern critics’ habit of contrasting intellect and imagination and of considering content and form as separable aspects of a poem is not adequate for approaching the Middle English religious lyric, for the proportions and effect of these poems issue directly from their subject matter. This point will be more fully illustrated by the following studies. Formulating a criterion by which a lyric can be considered good or bad must wait until Part III, after a fuller consideration of the poetry has given a fuller experience with the subject matter and proportions of the poems.