



## Sumer is icumen in

London, British Library, MS Harley 978, f. 11v

### Introduction

This early Middle English *rota*, a canon for several voices, survives in a manuscript from Reading Abbey dating from the mid-thirteenth century. The alternative Latin text in red ink beneath it is a lyric on the Passion. The main critical debate on the poem has centred on the relationship between the two texts: which came first, and what is the relationship between them?

### Date, ownership, and contents

British Library, MS Harley 978, is a manuscript from Reading Abbey dating from the mid-thirteenth century. Reading Abbey, however, did not have a scriptorium, and the MS was probably copied at Oxford, which as a university town was a major centre of book production by this period. It was probably owned by one of the three Reading monks it mentions, William of Winchester, a lover of music whose history was otherwise undistinguished and occasionally scandalous; on a visit to Leominster Priory in the 1270s, he was brought before the Bishop of Hereford for incontinence with a number of women, including a nun of Limebrook Priory.

The manuscript is a miscellaneous compilation, mainly of Latin and French texts, useful or entertaining rather than devotional; it includes other musical pieces (all religious), medical material, Goliardic satires, the earliest and best text of the *Lais* of Marie de France, and a French poem on hawking. *Sumer is icumen in* is the only Middle English text in the manuscript, and it is possible that it was included primarily for its musical interest.

FROM: <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/har1978/sumer.htm>

**S**umer is i tamen in. Ihude sing cucu. Swyeh sed and blowep  
*Per spica xpicola que dignacio celicus agrico*

med and springe pe wde nu. Sing cucu tve bletet after  
*la pro uitis vicio filio non parcent expoli*

Lomb. Ihoup after calue cu Bulluc stertep. bucke uertep  
*it mortis exicio Qui captiuos semiuuio*

gurtie sing cucu. Cucu cucu Wel singel pu cucu ne siwik  
*a supplicio Vite donat et secum coronat in ce*

**H**anc notam cantare possunt quatuor socij. A paucio  
 ribus autem qm a tribus ut saltem duobus no debet  
 dici. preter eos qui dicunt pedem. Cantet autem sic. *G*acem  
 taly cetisim michoat cu huius q tenet pede. Et cu uenerit  
 ad primam notam post cruce. michoat alius. Et sic de ceteris.

**S**ing cucu nu. Sing cucu. *hoc repetit unquoque op est.*  
*faciens pausacionem in fine.*

**P**ef. **S**ing cucu. Sing cucu nu. *hoc dicitur alii pausant in medio et in fine. Si immediate repetit principium.*





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### Middle English text

(with Latin instructions for singing)

- Sumer is icumen in,  
 + Lhude sing, cuccu;  
 Groweth sed  
 and bloweth med,  
 5 And springth the wde nu;  
 Sing, cuccu!  
 Awe bleteth after lomb,  
 Lhouth after calue cu;  
 Bulluc sterteth,  
 10 [Bucke uerteth](#),  
 Murie sing, cuccu!  
 Cuccu, cuccu,  
 Wel singes thu, cuccu;  
 Ne swic thu naver nu.  
 15 *Pes: Sing, cuccu, nu; sing, cuccu;*  
*Hoc repetit unus quociens opus est, faciens pausacionem*  
*in finem.*  
 16 Sing, cuccu; sing, cuccu, nu!  
*Hoc dicit alius, pausans in medio et non in fine,*  
*sed immediate repetens principium.*

*Hanc rotam cantare possunt quatuor socij. A paucioribus autem quam a tribus uel saltem duobus non debet dici, preter eos qui dicunt pedem. Cantatur autem sic: Tacentibus ceteris unus inchoat cum hiis qui tenent pedem. Et cum uenerit ad primam notam [post crucem](#), inchoat alius, et sic de ceteris. Singuli uero repausent ad pausaciones scriptas et non alibi, spacio unius longe note.*

Latin text

- Perspice, Christicola,  
 Que dignacio!  
 Celicus agricola  
 Pro vitis vicio  
 5 Filio  
 Non parcens exposuit  
 Mortis exicio,  
 Qui captivos semivivos  
 A supplicio  
 10 Vite donat  
 Et secum coronat  
 In celi solio.

## Sumer is icumen in: glossary

<http://www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/harl978/sumglos.htm>

### A

**after** *prep.* after, to 7, 8.

**and** *conj.* and 4, 5.

**awe** *n.* ewe 7.

### B

**bleteth** *vb. pres. 3 sg.* bleats 7.

**bloweth** *vb. pres. 3 sg.* blooms 4.

**buके** *n.* billy-goat? 10.

**bulluc** *n.* bullock 9.

### C

**calue** *n.* calf 8.

**cu** *n.* cow 8.

**cuccu** *n.* cuckoo 2, 6, 11, etc.

### G

**groweth** *vb. pres. 3 sg.* grows 3.

### I

**icumen** *vb. pa. pple.* come; **icumen in** arrived 1.

**in** *adv.:* see **icumen**.

**is** *vb. pres. 3 sg.* is; has (*with vb. of motion*) 1.

### L

**lhouth** *vb. pres. 3 sg.* lows 8.

**lhude** *adv.* loudly 2.

**lomb** *n.* lamb 7.

### M

**med** *n.* meadow 4.

**murie** *adv.* merrily, sweetly 11.

### N

**naver** *adv.* never; **ne . . . naver** not . . . ever 14.

**ne** *adv.* not 14.

**nu** *adv.* now 5, 14, 15, etc.

### S

**sed** *n.* seed 3.

**sing** see **singes**

**singes** *vb. pres 2 sg. sing* 13; **sing** *imper. sg. sing!* 2, 6, 11, etc.

**springth** *pres. 3 sg.* comes into leaf 5.

**sterteth** *vb. pres. 3 sg.* prances 9.

**Sumer** *n.* summer, warm weather 1.<sup>1</sup>

**swic** *vb. imper. sg.* stop 14.

### T

**the** *def. art.* the 5.

**thu** *pers. pron. 2 sg.* you 13.

### U

**uerteth** *vb. pres. 3 sg.* farts?<sup>2</sup>

### W

**wel** *adv.* well 13.

**wde** *n.* wood 5.

<sup>1</sup> **1. Sumer:** spring or summer? The ME word extends over a longer period than the modern one (see [Fischer \(1994\)](#). [Roscow \(1999\)](#) argues that the poem describes early summer rather than spring.

<sup>2</sup> **10. buके uerteth:** the translation of this line is uncertain. Most editors translate *buके* as "stag"; *MED*, s.v. *bukke* *n.* 1a (a), prefers the alternative meaning "billy-goat". *Uerteth* is generally taken as the earliest recorded instance of the verb "fart" (from OE \**feortan*; see *MED*, s.v. *ferthen* v.). Silverstein (1971), p. 37, suggests instead derivation from Latin *vertere*, "turn, paw up (the ground)", hence "gambol", comparing late-C16 English *vert* (see *OED*, s.v. *vert* v. 1); but this seems both rather late and rather learned for the context here. See also [Platzer \(1995\)](#), for a defence of 'cavorts'.