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Two Tudor Poems in a Latin Book of Hours

Oliver Pickering

Two English rhyme-royal stanzas of unusual quality are preserved on the final fly-leaves of a book of hours now in the Brotherton Collection of Leeds University Library. They are self-contained poems, each being translated from or based on accompanying Latin. The stanzas were printed in the 1860s, following the exhibition of the book at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries in London,¹ but they have remained unknown to modern scholars. They are recorded neither in the *Index of Middle English Verse* nor in the *Index of English Verse in Manuscript, 1501-1558*.²

The book of hours in question, Brotherton Collection MS 17, was probably written in the Netherlands, for the English market, towards the end of the fourteenth century.³ Its most striking feature now is its sadly wrecked appearance: it is broken-backed (an attempted repair to the original binding having also failed) and extensively mutilated. Of a likely total of 118 leaves only ninety-one remain, fifteen of the missing twenty-seven having probably been cut out in post-medieval times for the sake of their illuminations.⁴ The leaves bearing the beginning of Matins (C1), Lauds (C6), Prime (D6), Terce (D8), Sext (E2), Nones (E4), Vespers (E6), Salve Regina (F2), the Penitential Psalms (H1), the Office for the Dead (I5), and the Psalter of St Jerome (N2), which are amongst those now absent, may possibly have had illuminated miniatures.

Compline, however, is dignified on f. 27r (E8) only by a large illuminated initial and full border (the highest level of decoration now surviving in the manuscript, used also for the Commendation of Souls on f. 65r and the Psalms of the Passion on f. 74r), so the original presence of miniatures is not at all certain.⁵ And despite the many extant smaller illuminated initials, the standard of production applied to the book was not of the highest. The text was initially written by two scribes, one broadly responsible for quires C-D (ff. 10r-21v), the other – the main

hand – for the Calendar (quire A, ff. 1-6) and quires E-N (ff. 23r-83v).⁶ A third scribe subsequently wrote (on to similarly ruled leaves) the inserted quires B and O (ff. 7-9, 84-87, both containing prayers), and made various short additions to the main Hours of the Virgin (including the leaf inserted after D7, now f. 22). The decoration, stretching from f. 1r to f. 84r, seems to have been carried out by a single hand, which confers some unity and dignity on the book, but it is clear that MS 17 would have presented an untidy and unfinished appearance even before suffering depredation. The presence of frequent blank ruled pages at the ends of the different Hours (only partially filled by the third scribe's additions) betrays a lack of careful planning, and the parchment is not of good quality.

The Hours of the Virgin and the original form of the Calendar follow the Use of Sarum, but many later additions to the Calendar (for example the red-letter days of SS John of Beverley and Wilfrid) point to the book's eventual use within the diocese of York. This is confirmed by the presence in the Calendar of numerous obits of members of the Clifton family, of Clifton near Nottingham, ranging in date from 1313 to 1491. All apart from the last are in the same hand, and they were probably inserted retrospectively by a member of the family in the 1480s.⁷

Other fifteenth-century additions, in various hands, include Latin prayers and other short Latin pieces transcribed on to ff. 88r-90r, 91r-v at the end of the book. It is here, on ff. 90r and 91r, that the two English stanzas occur, written in a distinctive late-medieval hand not found elsewhere. The text, together with that of the accompanying Latin, is as follows:⁸

(1) f. 90r

[D]omine si vis me condempnare secundum iusticiam tuam magnam . apello ad tuam misericordiam que maior est . nam reatus mee concienzie suspectam habet curiam tue iusticie.

O blessed lord though thorough thy ryghtwesnes
Thow be dysposed to dampne me feynt & freyle
To thy mercy wych ys much more dowtlesse
For my releffe I instantly appele
And wyth thy court of ryght I wyl not dele
For my seke saule whos synnez been detecte
Haveth vtterly thy ryghtwes cowrt suspecte

(2) f. 91r

Puluere perturbans turbatus marmore scribit

Whoo lyst to trowbull he mey surely trust
Thoff he hys wrongez & all hys werkez amisse
Writez easely in soft and sarced dust
He wrytez not soo þat hurt and trowbuld ys
Bot wyth a chesell that hard steled ys
Impryntez them full depe in marbull ston
And hatefull harme ys not forgett anon

'O blessed lord' is a sinner's appeal to God to dispense mercy, not justice. It is a relatively close translation of the Latin, which may be rendered: 'Lord, if you have a mind to damn me, in accordance with your great justice, I appeal to your mercy, which is greater; for the guilty state of my conscience regards the court of your justice with suspicion'. 'Whoo lyst to trowbull', a secular poem, is different in being an expansion of a chiasitic Latin epigram (broadly, 'He who causes trouble writes in dust, he who suffers it, in marble').⁹

The poems have in common a marked technical facility, and an element of protest. They use the tight *ababbcc* structure of their rhyme-royal stanza form to make statements that take them beyond their originals. In each case the last line is a strongly-felt climax to a fluent argument.

'O blessed lord' opens like a conventional prayer, quietly following the syntax of its source. Line 2 provides the first example of the effectively limited alliteration that is another shared feature of the poems; *feynt & frele* is the first real elaboration of the bare Latin. It is in line 4 that the urgency of the situation first becomes apparent: the appeal is not only for *releffe* – as if from a present crisis – but is 'instant'. It is a pressing demand, springing from this sinner's belief in his right to appeal against God's righteousness.¹⁰

From line 5, the structural turn of the poem – a line not represented in the Latin – the writer becomes ever more definite. Picking up in advance his source's final *curiam tue iusticie*, he asserts that he will not deal with it. He will ignore the court because his *seke saule* – in need of healing, not punishment, and whose sins have only too easily been found out – utterly mistrusts it. The poet has reached this conclusion in a single continuous sentence, like the Latin, but has moved much

further emotionally. His last line follows his source closely in that *Haveth . . . suspecte* – 'regards with suspicion' – copies exactly the grammatical construction of *suspectam habet . . .* (it is not, as at first sight, a perfect tense),¹¹ but it carries quite different force as a result of *vitterly*. The case is no longer one of suspicion, but of thoroughgoing distrust. The sinner is certain he will not get a fair deal there.¹² What began as a cry for help ends as defiance of divine justice.

'Whoo lyst to trowbull' is in contrast a bitter reflection on the psychological reality of this world, in which the poet expands on and intensifies his Latin original to an even greater extent. In so doing he preserves the proverb's metaphor. The trouble-maker (says the poet) knows that he writes down his wrong-doings in no more than dust, i.e. that their record will be scattered or blown away, and thus erased from his memory and conscience; whereas his victim writes his sufferings in marble, using a steel-hard chisel to make deep and lasting incisions. This reading – which is no more than what is required by *Puluere perturbans turbatus marmore scribit* – demands in l. 2 the straightforward emendation to [That] of the copyist's *Thoff* (which if left unemended conveys no sense). The text consequently becomes:

Whoo lyst to trowbull he mey surely trust
[That] he hys wrongez & all hys werkez amisse
Writez easely in soft and sarced dust
He wrytez not soo þat hurt and trowbuld ys
Bot wyth a chesell that hard steled ys
Impryntez them full depe in marbull ston
And hatefull harme ys not forgett anon

There is here, as in 'O blessed lord', a confident flow of argument backed up by understated (but appropriate) alliteration and assonance: t's in the definite statement of l. 1, s's in the more languid l. 3 where *easely* combines effectively with *soft* and *sarced* 'sifted'.¹³ The poem is formed from two sentences, the structural turn coming this time as early as l. 4, which breaks the unity of the initial quatrain. Lines 4-6 on the victim parallel ll. 1-3 on the perpetrator, with the main active verb (*Writez, Impryntez*) delayed in each case until the first word of the third line. With the poem approaching its climax it is appropriate that the second set of three lines move the quicker, helped by the *bb* rhyme of ll. 4-5 (though the repetition of past participle adjective + *ys* may be regarded as a stylistic blemish). But the real force of the poem resides, even more than in 'O blessed lord', in l. 7, in which the poet

breaks out of his Latin-derived metaphor. Earlier he did not find it necessary to explicate *Writez easely in soft and sarced dust*, but now he asserts, memorably, the message that *hatefull harme ys not forgett anon*, reintroducing alliteration (and the clipped assonance of *not forgett*) just when needed.

There can be little doubt that the same person composed both of the English poems preserved in MS 17. The use of a Latin starting-point, the exploiting of the rhyme-royal stanza's structural potential, the fluent yet concise expression, the intelligent vocabulary, the independence of thought, the sense of personal suffering – all these suggest the same mind and hand.

The poems are written into the manuscript in an angular and sophisticated (though not quite consistent) Bastard Secretary hand, apparently of the end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century. Assuming their transcription was more or less contemporary with their composition, their style and tone suggest a later rather than an earlier date.¹⁴ The poet seems to have moved past medieval habits of thinking and writing to a sparer and more individualistic mode of expression; away from the wordiness and aureation still characteristic of Skelton's rhyme-royal stanzas to something closer to the simple directness of Sir Thomas More:

Whoso delyteth to proven and assay,
Of waveryng fortune the uncertayne lot,
If that the aunswere please you not alway,
Blame ye not me: for I commaunde you not,
Fortune to trust, and eke full well ye wot,
I have of her no brydle in my fist,
She renneth loose, and turneth where she lyst.

This, the first stanza of 'Thomas More to them that seke fortune',¹⁵ builds to its assertive conclusion in a way not dissimilar to 'O blessed lord' and 'Whoo lyst to trowbull'. One might even compare a greater poem, Sir Thomas Wyatt's 'In court to serue', which (like the former) reaches its final paradox by means of a single fluent sentence:¹⁶

In court to serue decked with freshe aray,
Of sugred meates felyng the swete repast,
The life in bankets, and sundry kindes of play

Oliver Pickering

Amid the presse of lordly lokes to waste
Hath with it ioynde oft times such bitter taste,
That who so ioyes such kinde of life to holde,
In prison ioyes, fettred with cheines of gold.

The 'whoso' or 'whoso list' formula, here delayed until the penultimate line, is characteristic of sixteenth-century reflective poems (cf. Wyatt's own 'Who list his wealth and ease retain', 'Whoso list to hunt', 'Stand who so list'). 'Whoo lyst to trowbull' and its companion piece in Brotherton Collection MS 17 are preserved for us in a medieval book of hours, but their author – and transcriber – belong to the age of humanism.

NOTES

¹ See *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, 2nd series, 4 (1867-70), 113-14, reporting a meeting held on 30 April 1868.

² Carleton Brown and Rosell Hope Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York, 1943), with *Supplement*, by Rosell Hope Robbins and J. L. Cutler (Lexington, 1965); William A. Ringler, Jr., *Bibliography and Index of English Verse in Manuscript, 1501-1558*, prepared and completed by Michael Rudick and Susan J. Ringler (London and New York, 1992). The poems are similarly absent from William A. Ringler, Jr., *Bibliography and Index of English Verse Printed 1476-1558* (London and New York, 1988).

³ This is the opinion of Christie's catalogue of 2 December 1987, where the manuscript is Lot 32 (the Brotherton Collection purchased it from this catalogue). A date before 1389 is perhaps suggested by a rubric on ff. 39v-40r which speaks of an indulgence granted by Pope Boniface at the request of King Philip of France. This must refer to Boniface VIII (1294-1303) and Philip IV (1285-1314), and may possibly indicate a date of writing anterior to Boniface IX (1389-1404).

⁴ The collation is complicated further by the presence of frequent non-structural protective stubs both around and within gatherings, but it now appears to be: A⁶ (ff. 1-6); B⁴ lacks 1 (ff. 7-9); C⁸ lacks 1, 6 (ff. 10-15); D⁸⁺¹ lacks 6, 8, one added after 7 (ff. 16-22); E⁸ lacks 2, 4, 6 (ff. 23-27); F⁸ lacks 1, 2 (ff. 28-33); G⁸, 1 seemingly an original stub (ff. 34-40); H⁸ lacks 1, 4 (ff. 41-46); I⁸ lacks 5 (ff. 47-53); K-M⁸ (ff. 54-77); N⁸ lacks 1, 2 (ff. 78-83); O⁴ (ff. 84-87); P⁸ lacking (i.e. wholly cut out); Q⁸⁷ lacks 4, 5, 7, 8 (ff. 88-91). It is probable that P and Q4, 5, 7, 8 were removed as unnecessary at an early stage of the book's history. No medieval quire signatures are visible.

⁵ The report in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries* (see n. 1 above) is somewhat ambiguous about the manuscript's physical state in 1868. It records both that 'some of the pages and most of the initial letters were illuminated', and that 'the book has been mutilated, some of its pages having been cut out'.

⁶ The main scribe in fact takes over on f. 21v, in mid-line.

⁷ All fifteen obits are printed in the report of the manuscript in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*. One of them is for William Bothe (Booth), Archbishop of York (d. 1464), whose sister Alice married Robert Clifton.

⁸ In each case the Latin is written in a textura script, but probably by the same person as wrote out the English verses. On f. 90r the Latin and English follow continuously on a preceding Latin text. On f. 91r the Latin heads the page, and the English poem is spaced off from both it and a following Latin item.

⁹ The proverb is listed as no. 22886 in Hans Walther, ed., *Proverbia sententiaeque Latinitatis Medii Aevi: Lateinische Sprichwörter und Sentenzen des Mittelalters*, 6 vols (Göttingen, 1963-69),

in the form 'Pulvere, qui ledit, sed Iesus marmore scribit'.

¹⁰ See *Middle English Dictionary*, *instanli* adv., 'with insistence, urgently, ardently, fervently'.

¹¹ See *Middle English Dictionary*, *suspect* adj., 1a (b) *haven suspect* (a variant of *holden suspect*), 'mistrust, regard as unreliable', and particularly the quotation a1500 (?1421) *Let. Marg. Anjou*, ' . . . ffor other juges in this matere he hath utterly suspecte'.

¹² The final line may well include a deliberately ironical play on two contrasting meanings of 'righteous', namely the actual (from the sinner's point of view) 'conforming to divine law', and the ideal 'impartial, fair-minded'.

¹³ See *Middle English Dictionary*, *sarcen* v., 'to sift through a sieve'. The word is wrongly transcribed as 'sacred' in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*.

¹⁴ In itself the poems' vocabulary does not seem to assist with dating, though it may be noted that in the *Middle English Dictionary* the use of *sarced* is illustrated exclusively by quotations from recipes. Several of the linguistic forms, for example *saule*, *Thoff* and the *-ez* verbal and substantive endings, indicate the Northern or North Midland area of England, but these (as with the erroneous *Thoff*, and cf. *though* in 'O blessed lord', l. 1) could be features of the copyist's language.

¹⁵ I quote from *The English Works of Sir Thomas More*, ed. W. E. Campbell, 7 vols (London and New York, 1931), I 343. 'Thomas More to them that seke fortune' is one part of 'Certain metres written by Master Thomas More in his youth for "The Book of Fortune"', dated c. 1505. For More's verse, see Sister Mary Edith Willow, *An Anlaysia of the English Poems of St Thomas More* (Nieuwkoop, 1974).

¹⁶ Quoted from *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, ed. Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson (Liverpool, 1969), pp. 252-53.