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Perfect Psalms for Perfect Men: The Use of Lollard Biblical Translations in Middle English Vernacular Preaching

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The process of translating the Bible into vernacular English is traditionally considered to have been gradual and fragmentary. Standard accounts focus on the *Tyndale Bible* (16th century) and summarize the medieval tradition as a kind of prelude to this work. Some famous or legendary translations and translators before Tyndale may be acknowledged: *Caedmon*'s biblical poems (late 7th century), *Aldhelm*'s translation of the Psalms (c.700), or *Bede*'s lost translation of the Gospel of John (sometimes before his death in 735). Another favourite is *Alfred the Great*, who oversaw the translation of the Psalms and Exodus, and the translation of the Gospels known as the *Wessex Gospels* (c.990). Mention might also be made of the *Old English Hexateuch* (11th century) and the late translation copied in the *Eadwine Psalter*, alongside the French one.¹ However, scholars rarely connect this Old English translation and the roots of modern works, which are essentially presented as stemming from *Wycliffe* and the Lollards.²

A favourite argument in all introductory presentations of biblical translations into vernacular English is the religious turmoil resulting from Pope Innocent III's ban on all unauthorised versions – and subsequently translations – of the Bible in 1199. His motives are usually traced to his need to counter Cathar and Waldensian heresies, and therefore (the story goes) it was just a matter of time until heterodox ideas began spreading across Europe once more. The *Wycliffite Bible*, predecessor of the *Tyndale Bible*, is frequently cited as the most famous translation of the Bible into vernacular English. It is usually characterised as having been inspired by *John Wycliffe*'s principle of teaching and preaching the word of God simply, in the image of the Apostles.³

Even though many of these ideas are incorrect or misleading (the Pope's letter of 1199 – to name but one example – does not explicitly forbid the translation of the sacred text, but its use in predication),⁴ my aim here is not to critique these introductory accounts but to offer a survey thereof. Although *Wycliffe* and the Lollard translators were not innovating

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¹ Ó Néill 1992. For the edition, see Harsley 1889.

² For a presentation of the Old English translations of the Psalms, see Toswell 2014. Cf. Brown 1999.

³ For more information concerning the Lollards and Wycliffe, see Ghosh 2002. Cf. Hudson 1988.

⁴ Boyle 1985.

by translating the Bible into English, and the repeated mention of the 1199 interdiction is influenced by the true and enforced interdiction of the 1407 *Arundel Constitutions*, clearly the increased popular access to the Holy Word marked an important shift in society. Ordinary people now had a say about how their spiritual life was considered, led, and supported.⁵ Nevertheless, the gradual disappearance of the Old English tradition during the century after the Norman Conquest gave rise to a Middle English tradition which had more in common with its French contemporary counterpart than with its Old English roots.

In fact, most of what has been said about French translations of the Psalter can be applied to the Middle English texts, though their number is lesser. English literature preserves several examples of Metrical Psalms well before the Reformation. The *Old English Metrical Psalter* is my first example, in spite of the gap between the Old and Middle English periods. It was followed, after several centuries, by the *Surtees Psalter*.⁶ The translation of the Penitential Psalms by the Carmelite monk **Richard Maidstone**, at the end of the 14th century,⁷ stands alongside that of **Thomas Brampton**, in c.1414.⁸ At a much later date they were joined by the Psalm paraphrase of **Thomas Wyatt the Younger** (1534-1541), inspired by a prose version by Aretino;⁹ the *Metrical Psalter* of **Robert Crowley** (1549), inspired by that of Calvin; and the one by **Thomas Sternhold** (1547-1549).¹⁰ This practice of paraphrasing Psalms into verse continued until later, during the Elizabethan age.¹¹ French Psalter translations, adaptations, and paraphrases were thus similar to those of the early French literature.

On the other hand, there are also many English word-by-word translations of the sacred text, in its original form or in commentary. Some of them follow French precedents, but they were very rare. In this category are the *Midland Prose Psalter* (or the *Middle English Glossed Prose Psalter*), a Middle English translation of an Anglo-Norman Psalter copied in the French manuscript 6260 of the National Library of France, in Paris.¹² In addition to the famous translation by **Richard Rolle** are also the *Wycliffite versions* of Richard Rolle's *English Psalter*, recently edited.¹³ The mere mention of this text opens the way to the realm of a completely different category of translations, the Lollard corpus, with its different heterodox or heretical stakes.

However, a complete inventory of all the translations of the Psalter is impossible to consider here, much as it was impossible to write a complete presentation of all the French medieval translations of the Psalter. Therefore it might be best to tackle a problem that first arose in the English translation of the sacred text, announcing thus, after a fashion, some issues that will be discussed in the Czech translations, with which some of the English texts may or may not have been related. Instead of focusing on a smaller corpus, I will consider the question of heterodoxy or heresy from a philological perspective and shift attention from the complete or incomplete translations of the Psalms towards the fragments quoted in many texts of the period.

* * *

The Oxford ms **Bodley 806** is a collection of sermons from the beginning of the 14th century that cannot be easily considered either Lollard or Orthodox (that is, rightfully or properly Catholic). It is a relatively small manuscript with no decoration, having served as source material in all likelihood, rather than as an actual preaching tool. Its date, along with

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⁵ For more information on reception and dissemination of the Wycliffite translation, see Muir 1935, p. 305.

⁶ Stevenson 1847. Cf. Sutherland 2015, p. 93-103, 121-135.

⁷ Edden 1990.

⁸ Kreuzer 1951.

⁹ Stamatakis 2012.

¹⁰ Quitslund 2008. For the English tradition of Metrical Psalms, see also Zim 1987.

¹¹ See for this the paraphrases of Henry Howard, Earl de Surrey, or that of Philip and Mary Sidney. Cf. Hamlin 2004.

¹² Black, St-Jacques 2012.

¹³ Hudson 2012-2014.

hath his wille in the lawe of the Lord, and schal think in his lawe, bothe nyght and day'. For he schal be as a tree, that is wijsli plauntid biside the rendels of watris, that schal yyue his fruyte in his due tyme, and his leef [that is, his virtue] schal not falle away, but alle thingis that he schal do, in grace schullen be welthi. Wel is him that so may studie to fynde pese preciouise fruytis, to make faire her owne soule wiþ flouris of holi writ. Thanne Crist wole take his resting place in pe chaumbre of her conscience.

The same Psalm in translation is found in **Bodley 806** in the 23rd Sunday after Trinity, as support in a diatribe against the corrupt clergy of the compiler's time:

...false prestes and prelatis þat weenden aweye in her lyuyng from þe treuþe of Cristes techynge, and weenden þese dayes into þe wickide counel with þe pharisees, ful of malice to take Cristes seruauantis in her wordes, and with þe power of þe Kynge, with lesynges [lies] and false witesse, namely if þey speken þe treuþe and stoppen synne by her power. And þis is seyn and oonly knowen, and yut Cristes Lawe wole haue his course; bot as þe Sauter Book seiþ: *Beatus vir qui non abiit in concilio impiorum*. 'Blessed be þe man þat ede not in þe counsel of wickid'.

The canonical nature of the Psalm translation cited in Bodley 806 is therefore still up for debate. As previously noted, certain passages do indeed lean towards the use of Lollard imagery or formulae.¹⁶ A particular case can be built on a phrase inserted between an allusion to the Psalms 90:13 and a quotation of Psalm 118:105:

Penkyng whereof he is icome and whar to He schal turne aȝen, strongly markyng þee staf of þe Cros, smyte þen hyme with Goddis worde redyng, or with sum oþur good occupacion doynge, as to ryse vp nakid and bete þi stynkyng fleysche with a ȝerde, where þe Fende hideþ hyme in þat fleysche. 'And so þu schalt al totrede vndir þi feete Saatanas'. And nedeful it is to a man þat weendeþ in derke weye a lanterne with liȝt. Liȝt in þe derke wey of þis lyfe is þe worde of God, as þe Salme seiþ: *Lucerna pedibus meis verbum tuum, lumen semitis meis*. 'Þi worde is a lanterne to my feete, and liȝte to my paþus'. He seiþ not þe plastre of Galiene is good for suche temptacions, ne Trebelynes lawe, bot þe lite lanterne þat is þe worde of God, for þis oþre is þe brande lityng þe weye þat ledeþ man to Helle.

The use of the expression **lantern with light** may indicate that the compiler of the sermon had read a Lollard opus bearing the same name, where many ideas similar to his may be found. The use of the expression "just" or "righteous men" in these sermons may point towards the same direction. Furthermore, in some cases the quotations seem to derive directly from the Lollard Bible (1382-1395).

MS BODLEY 806: *Qui confidunt in Domino sicut mons Syon non commendebitur in eternum qui habitat in Ierusalem*. 'Þey þat tristen in the Lord (...) as þe Mount of Syon: he schal not be remoued withoute ende, þat dwelleþ in Ierusalem'.

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¹⁶ For more information, see Hudson 1985.

Psalm 124 :1

LOLLARD BIBLE: Thei that tristen in the Lord ben as the hil of Syon; he schal not be moued with outen ende, that dwellith in Jerusalem.

These may be, in fact, perfect coincidences that may lead towards the idea

that the sermons contained in **Bodley 806** are dependant upon the Lollard Bible. However, a different interpretation may be possible. If we return to the Psalm quotation located after the phrase “*lantern of light*”, we find that the English translation closely resembles the one found in the Lollard Bible:

Psalm 118:105

LOLLARD BIBLE: Thi word is a **lanterne** to my feet; and liyt to my **pathis**.

MS BODLEY 806: *Lucerna pedibus meis verbum tuum, lumen semitis meis*. ‘Di worde is a **lanterne** to my feete, and lizte to my **paþus**’.

Everything seems to fall into the right place, but this may also happen because the Latin syntax presents a different word order than the English, whose word order cannot accept the nominal predicative of the subject before the subject and the verb. Another example may also support this theory:

Psalm 71:6

LOLLARD BIBLE: He schal come doun as reyn in to a **flees**.

MS BODLEY 806: *Quia descendit sicut pluvia in vellus*, “ffor as reyne comeþ down into þe **wolle**”.

Psalm 10:7

LOLLARD BIBLE: ...brymston, and the spirit of **tempestis** ben the part of the **cuppe** of hem.

There is also a quotation and translation of the Psalm 10:7, where most of the words are the same, but for two key ones:

MS BODLEY 806: *Sulphura et spiritus procellarum pars calicis eorum*. ‘Brumston and þe spirite of **stormes**, parte of þe **chalis** of hem’.

Psalm 44:4 + Psalm 149:6

LOLLARD BIBLE: Be thou gird with thi swerd; on thi hipe most myytili [...] and swerdis scharp on ech side in the hondis of hem.

Further examples exist, for instance in a phrase mixing two quotations (Psalm 44:4 + Psalm 149:6), because of their relative similar content:

MS BODLEY 806: *Accingere gladio tuo super femur tuum, potentissime*. ‘Girde þu þe with þi swerde vpon þine hippe, worþily or miþtely’ [...] *Gladii ancipites in manibus eorum*. ‘Swerdes double egeded in þe hondes of hem’.

Psalm 41:9

LOLLARD BIBLE: ...the Lord sente his merci in the dai.

Similar choices of words are to be found in many cases, but there are also many passages where the two texts diverge greatly from one another:

MS BODLEY 806: *Qui in die mandauit Dominus misericordiam suam*. ‘For in þat dai, God comaundide His mersy’.

Perhaps the word order in the manuscript may be influenced by the Latin quotation which precedes the translation. Nevertheless, other differences point towards a direct translation from the Latin text copied in the manuscript. Such are the cases of the words chosen to sound like the Latin ones, whilst the Lollard Bible proposes a different and correct translation with another word. And there are also completely different translation choices, passages where the Bodley 806 version diverges completely from the Lollard text:

Psalms 54 :16, 7:13, 2:4

LOLLARD BIBLE: ...and go thei doun quyk in to helle

MS BODLEY 806: *Descendebat in infernum viventes*. ‘Lyuynge þey eden doun to helle’.

LOLLARD BIBLE: ...he schal florische his swerd; he hath bent his bouwe, and made it redi.

MS BODLEY 806: *Gladium suum vibrabit; arcum suum tetendit*. ‘He schal brandische his swerde and he schal bende his bowe’.

MS BODLEY 806: *Set qui habitat in celis iridebit eos.* ‘Bot He þat dwelliþ in heuenes schal lawþe suche to scorne’.

LOLLARD BIBLE: He that dwellith in heuenes schal scorne hem; and the Lord schal bimowe hem.

Mediaeval translation practice was far from consistent or easy, varying from word-by-word translation to adaptations, abridgements and even *ad-hoc*, oral ones. Most clerks knew their Psalms by heart. Translation was therefore a delicate exercise, especially when it came to the sacred text, where beyond the mere words the translator had to make sure the doctrine was fully conveyed. Where the translation of the Psalms is concerned, Michael Kuczynski points out an added layer of difficulty to it: the three textual traditions of the Psalter, as well as the sheer number of other, patristic, texts like Augustine’s *Ennarationes in Psalmos*.¹⁷ He also makes a compelling case for the medieval translator’s propensity of taking the biblical text to the letter and for doctrinal preservation in translation by signalling the words of the anonymous author of the *General Prologue* to the *Wycliffite Bible* who praises the special virtue of the Psalms if they are regarded accurately and attentively, for:

Noo book in the eld testament is hardere to vndirstonding to vs Latyns, for oure lettre discordith myche fro the Ebreu, and many doctouris taken litel heede to the lettre, but al to the goostly vndirstonding [*i.e.*, interpretation is more important than the litteral meaning]. Wel were him that koude wel vndirstonde the Sautir, and kepe it in his lyuyng, and seie it deuoutly, and conuicte Jewis therbi; for manye men that seyn it vndeououtly, and lyuen out of charite, lyuen foule on hemsself to God, and blasfemen hym, whanne thei crien it ful loude to mennis eeris in the chirche.¹⁸

The evidence suggests that, for Lollards, or Lollard sympathisers, the Psalter and its text are paramount to leading a good life and obtaining redemption. Michael Kuczynski¹⁹ underlines that meant in practice that the translation issues needed to be dealt with in such a way as not to taint the basis of moral reading and reflection, since textual, interpretive, and ethical approaches to the Psalter are always interrelated in the Lollard doctrine: “Evidence of this relationship survives in a strong commentary on the Psalms, nearly 1,500 discrete but cohesive glosses [are] preserved uniquely in Bodleian Library, Oxford, ms Bodley 554.” His forthcoming edition of this manuscript will greatly contribute to the existing scholarship and understanding of the translation practices in relation to dogma and Lollard doctrine.

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¹⁷ Kuczynski 2010.

¹⁸ From the *General Prologue* to the *Wycliffite Bible*, chapter 5. See Forshall, Madden 1850, vol. 1, p. 15.

¹⁹ Kuczynski 2010.