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Aude Mairey

Poetic *translatio* in England at the end of the Middle Ages

Poetic *translatio*, that is to say translation or adaptation of a text (in prose or in verse) in a versified form, is an important mode of composition in England at the end of the Middle Ages, especially in the first half of the fifteenth century. It must be set in the context of a large movement of translations of texts of all kinds into English, in the process of “literarisation” of this vernacular language, framed by the formation of a specific English culture¹. I have addressed elsewhere the main characteristics of this movement and will only recall them briefly here². Firstly, translations from French were numerous – Latin was not the only mediating language. Secondly, the patrons of these translations were mainly members of the nobility or the gentry: it is only with Henry V and his brother Humphrey of Gloucester, from the 1410s, that one can see the beginnings of princely politics in these matters – and princely interest was not always sustained before the end of the fifteenth-century³. Lastly, the consequences of the first integral translation of the Bible by the lollards, at the end of the fourteenth [p. 90] century, for authors writing in English in the fifteenth century, must be taken in account⁴.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to distinguish the terms translation and *translatio*. The second term has a wider spectrum of meanings, as is now generally recognized by scholars in the field, especially in the anglophone area⁵. *Translatio* refers to adaptations as well as literal translations and is linked to the ideological contexts of *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii*⁶. And the texts that have survived are in fact mostly adaptations, even if literal translations are not

¹ This formation is the main object of my research. See for instance Aude Mairey, “Littérature, esthétisation et politique en Angleterre à la fin du Moyen Âge”, forthcoming in *Vecteurs de l'idéal et mutations des sociétés politiques*, dir. Jean-Philippe Genet, Paris et Rome, Publications de la Sorbonne-École française de Rome. I am very grateful to John Watts for his counsels and corrections.

² Aude Mairey, “Les traductions anglaises à la fin du Moyen Âge”, in *Sciences et savoirs sous Charles V*, dir. Olivier Bertrand, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2014, p. 283-297. See also *The Idea of Vernacular. An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, dir. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Watson, Nicholas Taylor, Andrew and Ruth Evans, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1999.

³ On these matters, and more generally on the contestation of the paradigm of the “triumph of English”, see, among several references, Gwylim Dodd, “The Spread of English in the Records of Central Government, 1400-1430”, in *Vernacularity in England and Wales, c.1300-c.1550*, ed. Elisabeth Salter and Helen Wicker, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011, p. 225- 266; Christopher Fletcher, “Langue et nation en Angleterre à la fin du Moyen Âge”, *Revue Française d'Histoire des Idées Politiques*, 36, 2012/2, p. 233-252.

⁴ On the lollard heresy, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988. On the Bible, see Mary Dove, *The first English Bible: the Text and Context of the Wycliffite Versions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007; Aude Mairey, “La Bible wycliffite”, in *Une histoire du monde au xve siècle (vers 1380-vers 1520)*, dir. Patrick Boucheron, Paris, Fayard, 2009, p. 458-463.

⁵ See mainly *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English, I, to 1550*, dir. Roger Ellis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁶ For an illuminating study on these questions, though in the French area, see Serge Lusignan, “*Translatio studii* and the Emergence of French as a Language of Letters in the Middle Ages”, *New Medieval Literatures*, 14, 2012, p. 1-19.

unknown⁷. In this respect, nearly all English literature of the period can, to some degree, be replaced in this context of *translatio*, even if this constitutes only one aspect of its dynamics.

In this paper, I wish to offer some reflections on verse literature and its various modes, mainly by poets of the first half of the fifteenth century (but with comparisons with authors of the end of the fourteenth century, whether writing in prose or in verse). The most famous poets of this period are Thomas Hoccleve († 1426), clerk of the Privy Seal, and the very prolific John Lydgate († 1450), a Benedictine monk⁸. But there [p. 91] were other figures, such as the Austin canon John Walton⁹; the gentleman John Metham¹⁰; or Osbern Bokenham and John Capgrave, both Austin friars and both dead in 1464¹¹. And there were also anonymous poets, though I will not discuss them in this paper. These men wrote works of various sorts – from ballads to hagiography, through romances, mirrors for princes and didactic works. But they all used verse form and they showed a consciousness of the formation of a poetic tradition in English, in the troubled times of the first half of the fifteenth century.

What were the motivations of these authors in choosing a poetic form for their adaptations and how did they conceive this form of composition? We need to remember that, in general, and notably for didactic and hagiographic works as well as for romances, the end of the fourteenth century and the fifteenth century was often seen as a period of development of prose. Prose has been seen as a major factor in the formation of a literary and intellectual written language in vernacular, particularly in historical writings. For some authors, the pseudo-Turpin for instance, the use of prose was more suitable to tell the truth¹². In other domains, it was considered like a suitable medium because of its supposed simplicity: the rewriting in English prose of a number

⁷ On this point, see for instance Peter F. Dembowski, “Learned Latin Treatises in French: inspiration, plagiarism, and translation”, *Viator*, 17, 1986, p. 255-269; Ronald Waldron, “John Trevisa and the Use of English”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 74, 1988, p. 171-202.

⁸ The bibliography on these authors is now impressive. On Hoccleve, see for instance John Burrow, *Thomas Hoccleve, Authors of the Middle Age*, 4, Aldershot, Variorum, 1994; Nicholas Perkins, *Hoccleve's Regement of Princes: Counsel and Constraint*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2001; Helen Killick, *Thomas Hoccleve as Poet and Clerk*, PhD., University of York, 2010; or my paper, “Thomas Hoccleve ou l'ambiguïté de l'autorité poétique”, in *La légitimité de l'implicite*, 2 vol., dir. Jean-Philippe Genet, Rome, École française de Rome, 2015, t. 1, p. 337-355. On Lydgate, see Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, London, Routledge, 1970; *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture and Lancastrian England*, ed. James Simpson and Larry Scanlon, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006; Maura B. Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture, 1422-1432*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

⁹ See Douglas Gray, “Walton, John (fl. 1410)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/view/article/28655>].

¹⁰ See Jamie C. Fumo, “John Metham's ‘strange style’: *Amoryus and Cleopes* as Chaucerian fragment”, *The Chaucer Review*, 43/2, 2008, p. 215-237; Chloe Morgan, “For my poyntel so rude ys [...] yt can nought grave: John Metham's *Amoryus and Cleopes* and the Stapletons of Ingham”, *Le poème et l'historien, Cahiers électroniques d'histoire textuelle du Lamop*, 6, 2013 [1st ed. online 2014].

¹¹ On Bokenham, see for instance Simon Horobin, “Politics, Patronage and Piety in the work of Osbern Bokenham”, *Speculum*, 82/4, 2007, p. 932-949; on Capgrave, see in first place Karen Winstead, *John Capgrave's Fifteenth Century*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

¹² See Emmanuelle Baumgartner, “Le choix de la prose”, *Cahiers de recherches médiévales*, 5, 1998 [online: <http://crm.revues.org/1322>].

of romances in the course of the fifteenth century is, indeed, an important phenomenon¹³. Nevertheless, the reality of the congruence between prose and truth or prose and simplicity has been largely revised in recent studies, especially for French literature, which have shown that many poetic texts were important regarding the transmission of knowledge, especially to the [p. 92] laity¹⁴ (and we must remember that the notion of poetry in the Middle Ages is much more encompassing than the use of versification¹⁵).

Admittedly, some translations in prose at the end of the fourteenth century are preceded by observations on the virtues of prose in comparison to versification. Thomas Usk, for instance, who wrote while he was imprisoned a *Testament of Love*, in part influenced by Boethius's *Consolatio philosophiae*, notes:

Many men there ben that with eeres openly sprad so moche swallowen the delyciousnesse of jestes and of ryme by queynt knyttyng coloures that of the goodnesse or of the badnesse of the sentence take they lytel hede or els none. Sothely, dul wytte and a thoughtful soule so sore have myned and graffed in my spyrites that suche craft of endytyng wol not ben of myn acqueyntaunce¹⁶.

Certainly, Usk tells us that he is not able to write in verse and that he prefers something easier – prose. Yet, this affirmation comes only after some criticisms of verse form that, according to Usk, distracts the reader from a good understanding of the text. In fact, contemporary arguments in favour of prose insist mostly on its clarity, which enables better learning¹⁷.

Indeed, in the second half of the fifteenth century, we find fewer great political or devotional poems, or great verse romances. In this context, we can ask why there was, in the England of the first half of the fifteenth century, a large poetic production in these areas. Readers' tastes are certainly an important factor, as we will see, but they do not [p. 93] explain everything. And in the confused political and religious context of the fifteenth century – especially in the wake of the Lancastrian usurpation of 1399 and the developments of the lollard heresy under the influence of the theologian John Wyclif – the question is intriguing. To clarify the matter, let us begin by presenting some of the great works that have been subjects to this

¹³ See Helen Cooper, "Romance after 1400", in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, dir. David Wallace, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 690-719.

¹⁴ See *Knowing Poetry: Verse in Medieval France from the Rose to the Rhétoriqueurs*, ed. Sarah Kay and Adrian Armstrong, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011; *Poetry, Knowledge and Community in Late Medieval France*, ed. Rebecca Dixon and Finn E. Sinclair, Woodbridge, D.S. Brewer, 2008.

¹⁵ See Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, "Sentier de rime et voie de prose au Moyen Âge", *Poésies*, 119, 2007, p. 123-131.

¹⁶ Thomas Usk, *Testament of Love*, ed. R. Allen Shoaf, Kalamazoo, TEAMS, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1998 (online: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/uskframp.htm>).

¹⁷ See, for instance, the *Dialogue between a clerk and a knight*, prologue to the translation of the well-known *Polychronicon* of Ranulph Higden by John Trevisa: Ronald Waldron, "Trevisa's Original Prefaces on Translation: A Critical Edition", in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. Edward D. Kennedy, Ronald Waldron and Joseph S. Wittig, Cambridge, Brewer, 1988, p. 285-299, reprinted in Aude Mairey and Stephen Morrison, *Dialogues et résistances: une anthologie de textes anglais de la fin du Moyen Âge, introduction, traduction et commentaires*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, p. 397-410. On Trevisa and his lord, see Ralph Hanna, "Sir Thomas Berkeley and His Patronage", *Speculum*, 64, 1989, p. 878-916.

poetic *translatio*.

Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*, Jacob de Cessolis' *Game of Chess* and the *Secretum secretorum* of the pseudo-Aristotle are three medieval best-sellers adapted (partially) by Thomas Hoccleve in his *Regement of Princes* composed for prince Henry (c. 1411-1412)¹⁸. There were French prose versions of these three works circulating in England. In addition, the *De regimine principum* was translated into English prose by the greatest translator of the end of the fourteenth century, John Trevisa, but only one copy survives today¹⁹. As for the *Game of Chess*, it was translated into English prose only at the end of the fifteenth-century by another prolific translator, the printer William Caxton²⁰. The *Secretum secretorum* is the only work that was translated several times into English, generally in prose²¹. But the only version which was relatively widespread (about twenty manuscripts survive) is in verse. It is an unfinished work by John Lydgate, completed by Benedict Burgh in the middle of the fifteenth century²². John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*²³, written in 1421-1428 is an adaptation of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, written in Latin prose [p. 94] between 1355 and 1360. But Lydgate used the French adaptation of the text made by Laurent de Premierfait at the beginning of the fifteenth century, also in prose²⁴. The English poet composed his adaptation in verse, contrary to the Latin original and the French version. He also wrote in verse the *Troy Book*²⁵, mainly an adaptation of Guido delle Colonne's *Historia troiannis*, as well as *The Life of our Lady* and many other works. In fact, Lydgate wrote only one text in prose during his very long career, the *Serpent of division*²⁶.

The story of the English versions of Boethius's *Consolatio philosophiae* is even more

¹⁸ Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Prince*, ed. Charles R. Blyth, Kalamazoo, TEAMS, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1999 (online: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/hoccint.htm>).

¹⁹ *The Governance of Kings and Princes. John Trevisa's Middle English Translation of the De regimine principum of Aegidius Romanus*, ed. David C. Fowler, Charles F. Briggs and Paul G. Remley, New York, Garland, 1997.

²⁰ William Caxton, *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, ed. Jenny Adams, Kalamazoo, TEAMS, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 2009 (online: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/ajgpint.htm>). On Caxton, see for instance N.F. Blake, *William Caxton and English Literary Culture*, London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 1991; A. Mairey, "William Caxton: auteur, éditeur, imprimeur", in *Identités britanniques. Espaces, langues, cultures*, dir. J.-P. Genet, *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes*, 19, 2010, p. 123-142.

²¹ *Secretum secretorum: nine English Versions*, ed. Mahmoud Manzalaoui, Early English Text Society, O.S. 276, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977.

²² *Lydgate and Burgh's Secrees of old philisoffres*, ed. Robert Steele, Early English Text Society, E.S. 66, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1894.

²³ *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 4 vol., ed. Henry Bergen, Early English Text Society, E.S. 121-124, London, Oxford University Press, 1924-1927.

²⁴ *Laurent de Premierfait's De cas de nobles hommes et femmes, Book I, Translated from Boccaccio*, ed. Patricia Gathercole, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1968.

²⁵ John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, 4 vol., ed. Henry Bergen, London, Oxford University Press (EETS, E.S. 97, 103, 106, 126), 1906-1935 and *Troy Book: Selections*, ed. Robert R. Edwards, Kalamazoo, TEAMS, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1998 (online: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/troyprfr.htm>).

²⁶ John Lydgate, *The Serpent of Division*, ed. H.N. MacCracken, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1911.

interesting: the text, very influential during this period, was translated in prose by Geoffrey Chaucer himself at the end of the fourteenth century²⁷; yet, it was again translated by John Walton at the beginning of the fifteenth century... in verse²⁸.

All these examples of adaptation are particularly notable. But there are also many partial adaptations in other contemporary works, as for instance John Gower's *Confessio amantis*, a long poem composed at the end of the fourteenth century²⁹. The *Confessio* is a complex work, in which the narrator confesses himself to Genius, Venus's priest; in fact, this is the frame Gower chooses to present numerous *exempla* covering many various subjects. And book VII, a real mirror for princes, is a partial adaptation of Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*, written in French prose (second half of the thirteenth century)³⁰.

So, most of the works mentioned here already existed in vernacular prose (mainly in French but also, in some cases, in English). Why were they adapted again, into verse? To try to answer this question, I will look [p. 95] firstly at the deliberations that guided these authors' choices of form, before linking these choices to the notions of pleasure and instruction. Lastly, I will show that the choice of form cannot be studied independently from the socio-political and religious context of the period.

THOUGHT-OUT FORMAL CHOICES

First of all, how did these poets represent and analyse their choice of verse form³¹? I do not think that choice was linked to the mnemonic and didactic traditions that influenced some contemporary texts, like conduct books for instance. On the contrary, these works are very much anchored in writing, in literariness (but mark that this is not incompatible with their public reading in a sociability context, as Joyce Coleman showed³²). This is especially apparent in Lydgate's works, for instance in the prologue of the *Troy Book*:

Ther was an auctour of ful highe renoun
That besied hym the tracys for to swe
Of Dite and Dares, and cast hym nat transmwe
In al the story a worde as in sentence

²⁷ *The Riverside Chaucer*, dir. Larry Benson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 395-470.

²⁸ John Walton, *Boethius*, ed. M. Science, Early English Text Society, O.S. 170, London, Oxford University Press, 1927.

²⁹ John Gower, *Confessio amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, Kalamazoo, TEAMS, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 2000-2006 (online: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/rpcaprfr.htm>).

³⁰ Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres dou Tresor*, éd. P. Chabaille, Paris, 1863.

³¹ For a presentation of the different types of verses in English, see Donka Minkova, "The Forms of Verse", in *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture, c.1350-c.1500*, dir. Peter Brown, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007, p. 176-195.

³² Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in late Medieval England and France*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

But folweth hem by swyche convenienc
 That in effecte the substaunce is the same;
 And of Columpna Guydo was his name,
 Whiche had in wrytyng passyng excellence.
 For he enlumyneth by crafte and cadence
 This noble story with many fresche colour
 Of rethorik, and many riche flour
 Of eloquence to make it sownde bet
 He in the story hathe ymped in and set,
 That in good feythe I trowe he hath no pere,
 To rekne alle that write of this matere,
 As in his boke ye may byholde and se.
 To whom I seie, knelyng on my knee:
 [p. 96] Laude and honour and excellence of fame,
 O Guydo maister, be unto thi name
 That excellest by sovereinté of stile
 Alle that writen this mater to compile.
 Whom I schal folwe as nyghe as ever I may³³...

These lines must be placed, as it is often the case, in the context of protestations of the humility of the poet – recurrent in this period. But an insistence on rhetoric and eloquence is very noticeable here. Lydgate is the main poet to develop these aspects, but we find them in the works of other contemporaries, and more and more in the course of the fifteenth century³⁴.

Moreover, this consciousness of the literariness of their works led poets to think about the nature of their activity. Many, like their colleagues writing in prose, considered the balance between the letter and the sense in translation, although they were generally less technical. Their vocabulary is, in this respect, revealing. Lexical analysis of a corpus of about thirty prologues and epilogues in prose and verse of this period³⁵ [p. 97] shows, in particular, that the terms “translate”

³³ John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, prologue, lines 355-375.

³⁴ It is the case, for instance, in the hagiographical works of Bokenham and Capgrave. See Osborn Bokenham *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary Serjeantson, Early English Text Society, O.S. 206), London, Oxford University Press, 1938; John Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine*, ed. K.A. Winstead, TEAMS, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1999 [online: <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/winstead-capgrave-the-life-of-saint-katherine>].

³⁵ This lexical analysis is part of a work in progress on the cultural, social and political construction of English at the end of the Middle Ages. The texts of the corpus are *Prick of Conscience*, *Cloud of Unknowing*, Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and *Treatise of the Astrolabe*, Trevisa's *Dialogue*, Gower's *Confessio amantis*, the *General Prologue of the Wycliffite Bible* and the anonymous prologue of a monastic Bible, Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*, Lydgate's *Troy Book* and *Fall of Princes*, the *Speculum devotorum*, the *Orchard of Syon* and the *Mirror of Our Lady*, the *Book of Margery Kempe*, Stephen Scrope's *Epistle of Othea*, Reginald Pecock's *Reule of Cristene Religion* and *Donet*, Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Women*, John Metham's *Amoryus and Cleopes*, Capgrave's *Life of St Katherine* and *Abbreuacion of Chronicles*, John Hardyng's *Chronicle*, Georges Ashby's *Active Policy of a Prince*, Georges Ripley's *Compound of Alchemy* and Thomas Norton's *Ordinal of Alchemy*. – The main tools of lexical analysis that I have used are the factorial analysis by correspondence, which allows to show the distribution of words in the texts and to highlight the relative oppositions between the words and the texts. These relative oppositions are represented in the form of a graph so we can see immediately which texts or words are the most distinct in a particular corpus. It makes it possible to perceive these phenomena on different scales and above all to work on large *corpora*; and the

and “translation” appear mainly in the prose texts, notably those of the end of the fourteenth century and often in a narrative of the history of translation since Antiquity, which constitutes an important argument justifying English translation. It is the case, for instance, in the *Dialogue* of John Trevisa:

Aristoteles bokes and othere bokes also of logyk and of filosofy were translated out of Gru into Latyn. Also, atte praying of kyng Charles, John Scot translated Seint Denys hys bokes out of Gru ynto Latyn. Also holy wryt was translated out of Hebrew ynto Gru and out of Gru into Latyn and thanne out of Latyn ynto Frensch. Thanne what hath Englysch trespassed that hyt myght nocht be translated into Englysch? Also Kyng Alured, that foundede the vnyuersite of Oxenford, translated the beste lawes into Englysch tonge and a gret del of the Sauter out of Latyn into Englysch, and made Wyrefryth, byschop of Wyrctre, translate Seint Gregore hys bokes Dialoges out of Latyn ynto Saxon. Also Cedmon of Whyteby was inspired of the Holy Gost and made wonder poesyes an Englysch nyght of al the storyes of holy wryt. Also the holy man Beda translatede seint Iohn hys gospel out of Latyn ynto Englysch³⁶.

Among the poets, Lydgate is the only one to use the noun “translation” more than once (nine occurrences in the *Fall of Princes*, three in the *Troy Book*, often to designate his own translation); the verb is not used much either³⁷. Of course, there are other polysemous terms that can refer to the activity of translation, like “draw” or “turn”, but they are not frequent. Actually, authors who write in prose, like John Trevisa or the author of the general prologue of the Wycliffite Bible, have much to say on these questions. Here are, for instance, the words of Trevisa in his letter to his lord Thomas Berkeley, completing his *Dialogue*:

For to make this translacion cleer and pleyn to be knowe and vnderstonde, in som place Y schal sette word vor word and actyue vor actyue and passiue vor passiue arewe ryght as a stondesth withoute chaungyng of the ordre of wordes. But yn som place Y mot change the rewle and the ordre of wordes and sette the actyue vor the passiue and ayenward. And yn som place Y mot sette a reson vor a word to telle what hyt meneth. Bot vor al such chaungyng, the menyng schal stonde and nocht be ychanged³⁸.

Nevertheless, although they are less specific, the poets are also looking for a harmony between sense and letter³⁹. But they are very conscious of the fact that they must deal with the constraints of versification. John Walton, for instance, claims that the metrical question forms a supplementary constraint for the translator:

As fro the texte that Y ne varye nocht
But kepe the sentence in his trewe entent,
And wordes eke as nyhe as may be brought

concordances, distributions and co-occurrences that allow us to refine nuances between texts and inside a text. For applications of these methodologies, see for instance Aude Mairey, “Qu’est-ce que le peuple ? Quelques réflexions sur la littérature politique anglaise de la fin du Moyen Âge”, *Médiévales*, 57, 2009, p. 53-74 [http://medievales.revues.org/5804].

³⁶ John Trevisa, *Dialogues*, p. 404. For more details, see Aude Mairey, “Les traductions anglaises”, *op. cit.*, p. 293-294; Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 84-88.

³⁷ 4 occurrences in the prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, 3 in the prologue of the *Regement*, 5 in the prologue of the *Troy Book* and 10 in those of the *Fall of Princes*.

³⁸ John Trevisa, *Dialogues*, p. 408.

³⁹ Note that anyway, this distinction is largely artificial. See Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages : Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Where lawe of metre is not resistent;
This matire whiche that is so excellent
And passeth both my cunnyng and my myght
So save hit Lorde in thi governement
That coust reforme alle thyng unto right⁴⁰!

Yet, in all cases, these poets wish firmly to bring improvements or adaptations to their originals, even if they generally protect themselves with the *topos* of humility; Walton, who decided to retranslate a work after Chaucer, is here on the front-line. But John Lydgate is especially clear on this ambition, in the first prologue of the *Fall of Princes*:

In his prologe affermyng off resoun,
Artifi eres hauyng exercise
May chaunge and turne bi good discrecioun
Shappis, formys, and newli hem deuyse,
Make and vnmake in many sondry wise,
As potteres, which to that craft entende,
Breke and renewe ther vesselis to amende.
Thus men off crafft may off due riht,
That been inuentiff & han experience,
Fantasien in ther inward siht
Deuises newe thoruh ther excellence;
Expert maistres han therto licence
Fro good to bettir for to chaunge a thyng,
[p. 99] And semblabli these clerkis in writyng,
Thyng that was maad of auctours hem befor,
Thei may off newe fynde and fantasie,
Out of old chaff trie out ful clene corn,
Make it more fressh and lusti to the eie,
Ther subtil witt and ther labour applie,
With ther colours agreable off hewe,
Make olde thynges for to seeme newe.
Afforn prouydid that no presumpcioun
In ther chaungyng haue noon auctorite,
And that meeknesse haue dominacioun,
Fals Envie that she not present be;
But that ther ground with parfit charite
Conueied be to ther auantage,
Trewli rootid a-myd of ther corage⁴¹.

Lydgate takes over the image of craftsmen exposed by Laurent de Premierfait:

Selon raison et bonne meurs l'omme soy exerçant en aucune science spéculative ou aultre puet honnestement muer son conseil ou propost de bien en mieulx, attendue la mutation des choses et des temps et des lieux. Et aussi puest un potier casser et rumpre aulcun sien vaissel, combien qu'il soit fait, pour lui donner aultre forme qui lui samble meilleur. Et ceste licence de muer la chose en mieulx n'est

⁴⁰ John Walton, *Boethius*, lines 17-24.

⁴¹ John Lydgate, *Fall of princes*, book I, lines 8-35.

pas donnée a l'omme pour seulement amender ou corriger sa propre œuvre ains mesmement lois a chascun de ce faire en la besoingne d'aultrui, puisque on le face par bonté de courage et par mouvement de pure charité qui en soy ne contient enuie, ne arrogance⁴².

But the English poet, as it is often the case, amplifies the words of the French translator, who is mostly concerned by moral matters. Lydgate does not exclude these matters⁴³, but in these lines he insists especially on form – the *colours agreable* refer to eloquence and rhetoric. For Lydgate, these *colours* are essential to please his readership, and above all his dedicatee, Humphrey of Gloucester⁴⁴.

[p. 100]

PLEASURE AND INSTRUCTION

Indeed, notions of entertainment and pleasure constitute another essential factor in the choice of versification: one must appeal to the reader⁴⁵. Besides Lydgate, who insists on this point in many of his works, Hoccleve directly evokes the matter in the *Regement*, explaining that it is one of the reasons why he wrote his text for the future Henry V. In this case, though, the notion of entertainment is also used to reinforce, indirectly, his authority, to the extent that he forcefully combines the two aspects: just after telling us that he writes to entertain the prince, during the evening before he sleeps, he implies that it is only a means to convey his good advice⁴⁶. Sometimes, the aesthetic pleasure of reading appears in an unexpected way. The remarks of John Metham are, on this point, particularly interesting. The narrator of *Amoryus and Cleope* explains that he wanted a readable version of the story presented, the story of Amoryus and Cleope, adapted from the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, from the book iv of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, after he saw a beautiful illuminated manuscript. He wanted to understand the sense of this manuscript:

But cause qwy that I this boke endyght
 Is that noqwere in Latyne ner Englysch I coude yt aspye,
 But in Grwe Y had yt, wrytyn – lymynyd bryght –
 Wyth lettyrrys of gold that gay were wrowght to the ye.

⁴² Laurent de Premierfait's *De cas de nobles hommes et femmes*, p. 88-89.

⁴³ Lydgate insists on the moral content of certain stories of the *Fall* in original envoys.

⁴⁴ On the literary patronage of Humphrey, see for instance Alexandra Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England. The case of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester*, Leiden, Brill, 2004. Lydgate is generally seen as a proto-laureate poet: see Robert Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

⁴⁵ See Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the later Middle Ages*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982; Jessica Rosenfeld, *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry. Love after Aristotle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁴⁶ See lines 2129-2144 of the *Regement of Princes: I am seur that tho bookes alle three / Red bath and seen your innat sapience; And as I hope, hir vertu folwen yee. / But unto yow compyle I this sentence / That, at the good lust of your excellence, / In short yee mowen beholde heer and rede / That in hem thre is scatered fer in brede. / And althogh it be no maneere of neede / Yow to consaille what to doon or leeve, / Yit if yow list of stories taken beede, / Sumwhat it may profyte, by your leeve ; / At hardest, whan yee been in chambre at eeve, / They been good for to dryve foorth the nyght ; / They shal nat harme if they be herd aright.*

That causyd me to mervel that yt so gloryusly
Was adornyd, and oftyn I enqwryd of lettyryd clerkys
Qwat yt myght be that poyntyd was wyth so merwulus werkys⁴⁷.

[p. 101] But Metham cannot find a clerk who could help him. Finally, it is a Greek traveller passing through Norwich who translates the story into Latin for him. These lines are all the more interesting because they feature a member of the gentry telling us that he owns a manuscript in Greek and lamenting the ignorance of this language by the clerks of his country. The story is, of course, completely implausible: Ovid is not a Greek author and our poet certainly knew it. Nevertheless, this original explanation suggests that the love of beautiful books can be an acceptable motivation for acquiring knowledge of new texts.

However, this pleasure in reading cannot be separated from instruction and teaching and poets' declarations on this point are numerous. If Hoccleve, as we saw, was rather oblique, John Gower is very clear in the second version of the prologue of the *Confessio amantis*:

Of hem that writen ous tofore
The bokes duelle, and we therfore
Ben tawht of that was write tho:
Forthi good is that we also
In oure tyme among ous hier
Do wryte of newe som matiere,
Essampled of these olde wyse,
So that it myhte in such a wyse,
Whan we ben dede and elleswhere,
Beleve to the worldes eere
In tyme comende after this.
Bot for men sein, and soth it is,
That who that al of wisdom writ
It dulleth ofte a mannes wit
To him that schal it aldai rede,
For thilke cause, if that ye rede,
I wolde go the middel weie
And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,
That of the lasse or of the more
Som man mai lyke of that I wryte⁴⁸.

It is difficult to be clearer: one must combine pleasure and instruction, because the first is necessary to the efficacy of the second.

It must be noted that these reflections do not only concern mirrors for princes and socio-

⁴⁷ John Metham, *Amoryus and Cleope*, ed. Stephen F. Page, Kalamazoo, TEAMS, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1999 (online: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/amointr.htm>), lines 57-70.

⁴⁸ John Gower, *Confessio amantis*, lines 1-21.

political texts, philosophical and didactic texts [p. 102] (not to mention the texts considered as purely literary). We also find them in some devotional texts, especially hagiographic ones. Lydgate, Bokenham and Capgrave, notably, all wrote saints' lives (masculine and feminine) in verse, and were very sensitive to the form of their texts⁴⁹. Yet again, there is probably an intention to please their readers and to instruct them in this way, by proposing a reading as engaging as a romance, but spiritually more beneficial⁵⁰. Osbern Bokenham, who wrote numerous saints' lives dedicated to women from the gentry or the nobility, is particularly representative of this trend. We can refer, for instance, to his *mise en scène* of the commissioning of the life of Mary Magdalene by the countess of Eu, in the middle of a feast whose description could easily be found in a romance. In this passage, Bokenham takes care to refer to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and to provide a list of his other saints' lives⁵¹.

John Capgrave, for his part, uses another argument in the prologue of the life of Katherine of Alexandria – who has, incidentally, an important political dimension because Katherine is a queen before she becomes a martyr⁵² – and this is all the more interesting because he turns the arguments of Thomas Usk on their head:

Ther was a preste, of flesch he was ful wan,
 For grete labour he had in his lyve
 To seke thi liffe yerys thyrte and fyve.
 Yet at the last he found it, to his gret joye,
 Fer up in Grece i-beryed in the grownde.
 [p. 103] Was nevyr no knyth in Rome ne eke in Troye
 Mor glad of swerde or basnett bryght and rownde
 Than was this preeste whan he had it fownde :
 He blyssed thee ofte, and seyde all his laboure
 Was turned to solace, to joye and socowr.
 He mad thi lyff in Englysch tunge ful well,
 But yet he deyed or he had fully doo.
 Thy passyon, lady, and all that scharp whele
 He left behynd-it is yet for to doo ;
 And that he mad it is ful hard ther-too,

⁴⁹ See for instance Shannon Gayk, “‘Ete this book’. Literary Consumption and Poetic Invention in John Capgrave’s Life of St Katherine”, in *Form and reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Shannon Gayk and Kathleen Tonry, Columbus, The Ohio State University press, 2011, p. 88-109; Alice Spencer, “‘By Auctorite of Experyence’: The Role of Topography in Osbern Bokenham’s Lives of Native Saints », in *Medieval and Early Modern Authorship*, ed. Guillemette Bolens and Lukas Erne, Tübingen, Narr, 2011, p. 277-291.

⁵⁰ On this point, see Jocelyn Wogan-Brown, “‘Bet... to... rede on holy seyntes lyves...’: Romance and Hagiography Again”, in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol Meale Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1994, p. 83-97; Matthew Woodcock, “Crossovers and Afterlives”, in *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed. Sarah Salih, Woodbridge, D. S. Brewer, 2006, p. 141-156.

⁵¹ Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Women*, lines 4981-5111.

⁵² See Karen A. Winstead, “Piety, Politics, and Social Commitment in Capgrave’s *Life of St. Katherine*”, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n. s. 17, 1990, p. 59-80; *eadem*, “Capgrave’s Saint Katherine and the Perils of Gynecocracy”, *Viator* 25, 1994, p. 361-376.

Ryth for straungenesse of his derk langage.
He is now ded, thu hast gove him his wage.
Now wyl I, lady, more openly make thi lyffe
Oute of his werk, if thu wylt help ther-too ;
It schall be know of man, mayde, and of wyffe,
What thu hast suffrede and eke what thu hast doo⁵³.

We do not know whether the anaemic priest, who spent the greatest part of his life looking for a text of the saint's life, directly translated it from Greek. We do not know, either, if he wrote it in verse or in prose. But we know that his language is obscure and that Capgrave wants to make a more readable text – a sort of translation of English, this time. And for him, it *is* versification that makes things clearer, and therefore allows a more adequate praise of the saint.

POETIZING OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEGITIMATION

These poetic adaptations, whatever their genre, could therefore be explained by a wish to combine these two fundamental notions in medieval literature which are pleasure and instruction. Yet, the recognized master of this tradition, Chaucer, for his part, selected prose for the texts which he considered to be particularly serious: in the *Canterbury Tales*, for instance, the *Tale of Melibee*, an important text on counsel firstly composed by Arnaud of Brescia in the middle of the thirteenth-century, [p. 104] and the *Parson's Tale*, a devotional treatise on confession and sin were both in prose; so was Chaucer's translation of Boethius or his scientific treatise on the astrolabe⁵⁴.

On the contrary, other poets like Gower, Hoccleve and Lydgate use fully and consciously a poetic *translatio* and a genuine poetizing of knowledge even though the last two poets, at least, claim to be followers of Chaucer⁵⁵. There is therefore something else happening here, especially because, in the second half of the fifteenth-century, this phenomenon is less clear-cut. We still find some didactic and political works in verse, such as the *Active Policy of a Prince* of Georges Ashby, written about 1470⁵⁶ (without taking into account the later works of John Skelton, for instance, which are more in a humanist context) or, in the same years, the alchemical texts of Thomas Norton and Georges Ripley – but in these last cases, the use of versification is linked to specific factors⁵⁷. In general, however, prose is progressing – we can see that, for instance, with

⁵³ John Capgrave, *Life of St Katherine*, lines 47-67.

⁵⁴ On Chaucer as a translator, see Paul B. Taylor, *Chaucer Translator*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1998; and more specifically on his *Boece*, *Chaucer's "Boece" and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1993.

⁵⁵ Among numerous references on the use of Chaucer at the end of the Middle Ages and beyond, see Derek Brewer, *Chaucer. The Critical Heritage*, 2 vol., London, Routledge, 1978; Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

⁵⁶ George Ashby, *The Active Policy of a Prince*, ed. Mary Bateson, Early English Text society, E.S. 76, London, Trübner, 1899.

⁵⁷ See Aude Mairey, "Entre littérature, science et politique: les œuvres alchimiques de Thomas Norton et George Ripley", *Revue Historique*, 658/2, 2011, p. 243-263.

the treatises of Sir John Fortescue and William Worcester, or, at a larger scale, the production of William Caxton. There are certainly some cultural factors for this progression – probably, in the first place, the greater sophistication of English in the second half of the fifteenth-century⁵⁸.

In my view, the phenomenon of poetizing knowledge in the first half of the fifteenth-century is linked, at least in part, to a troubled context in the political and religious spheres⁵⁹. On the one hand, among the poems with important social and political overtones (even if the boundaries are difficult to define precisely), several were commissioned by, or [p. 105] at least dedicated to, Henry V or his brother Humphrey of Gloucester – especially those whose diffusion was important, that is mainly, the *Regement of Princes* and some works of Lydgate. The genesis of these texts must, in part, be placed in the context of the need of legitimation of the Lancastrians since Henry IV deposed his cousin Richard II en 1399. As a matter of fact, the Lancastrians seem to have been the first rulers to support the development of written English in the administration, even if the claims made on their behalf are nuanced now; and effectively, English only began to become an official language, and not the only one, around the middle of the fifteenth century⁶⁰. That said, they undeniably supported the formation of a literary tradition in the vernacular language of English and they probably encouraged the diffusion of texts of Gower, Hoccleve and Lydgate, as several studies on manuscript circulation of these texts have shown⁶¹. This is all the more important, in that members of English political society – especially the gentry and urban elites – were eager to read this type of work and, more generally, were eager to read a literature in English, which these princes were promoting. And poetic form was a mean to contribute to the sophistication of a vernacular language in construction.

Legitimation, which is here completely implicit⁶², appears to go also through by formal choices. Nevertheless, these poems had to be useful for political society, hence the importance of their political content. The poetizing of knowledge claimed by the poets matches, indeed, a particular moment, the moment where a dynasty lacking legitimacy tries to answer the various demands of its new subjects, while seeking to gain symbolic profit from doing so. In this respect, it may be not a coincidence if the author of *The Active Policy of a Prince*, George [p. 106] Ashby, one of the last Lancastrians and tutor to the son of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou, wrote this

⁵⁸ For more details on this point, see my paper, “Littérature, esthétisation et politique”, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ This is not to say, of course, that the second half of the second century was not a troubled time!

⁶⁰ See G. Dodd, “The Spread of English”, *op. cit.*; Ch. Fletcher, “Langue et nation en Angleterre”, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ On the diffusion of English texts in the first half of the fifteenth-century, see for instance *Design and Distribution of late Medieval Manuscripts in England*, ed. Margaret Connolly and Lynne Mooney, York, York Medieval Press, 2008; *The Production of Books in England, 1350-1500*, ed. Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011. On the diffusion of the *Confessio amantis*, which is much discussed, see Derek Pearsall, “The Manuscripts and Illustrations of Gower’s Works”, in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2004, p. 73-97.

⁶² On the importance of implicit legitimation, see J.-Ph. Genet, dir. *La légitimation implicite*, *op. cit.*

poem under the aegis of Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate:

Maisters Gower, Chauucer and Lydgate,
Primier poetes of this nacion,
Embelysshing oure englisshe tendure algate,
Firste finders to oure Consolacion
Off fresshe, douce englisshe and formacion
Of newe balades, not vsed before,
By whome we all may haue lernyng and lore⁶³.

Turning to the devotional poems, meanwhile, and notably the saints' lives of Lydgate, Capgrave and Bokenham, one can see, at least in part, a clear answer to the problems posed by lollards. To write in a poetic form, once again under the patronage of Chaucer, provides a cover for the very fact of writing devotional texts in English, in a context where writing on religion in English had become problematic. The authors, particularly, must deal with the *Constitutions* of the archbishop Thomas Arundel, published in 1409, which aimed to strictly regulate the production in vernacular⁶⁴. These Constitutions did not stifle this production, but they may have necessitated more prudence. In this regard, the text of Thomas Hoccleve, *The Remonstrance to Sir John Oldcastle*, written in 1415 to turn away this former friend of Henry V from heresy, is revealing: in verse, again, it defends orthodoxy, particularly the orthodoxy of Henry V himself; and it puts emphasis on literary readings to divert Oldcastle from his unhappy choices⁶⁵. But at the same time, perfectly orthodox writers like John Capgrave did not hesitate, in the framework of a verse [p. 107] hagiography, to address complex theological *and* political problems⁶⁶. Indeed, according to Vincent Gillespie, the fact of writing in a versified and sophisticated language was itself a reaction against the "simple prose" of the Lollards⁶⁷.

To conclude, it appears that analysis of the formal choices made by authors, each at a given time and in a given context, enriches our understanding of the content of their works, and is essential if we want to grasp the socio-cultural and political transformations that surrounded

⁶³ Georges Ashby, *Active Policy of a Prince*, lines 1-8.

⁶⁴ In a famous paper, Nicholas Watson insisted on the negative effects of these Constitutions in the fifteenth-century: Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England", *Speculum*, 70, 1995, p. 822-864. Nevertheless, a recent volume, *After Arundel. Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011, shows that these effects must be nuanced and that the English devotional literature of the fifteenth-century possessed rich and specific characteristics.

⁶⁵ Thomas Hoccleve, "The Remonstrance to Oldcastle", in *Selections from Hoccleve*, ed. Michael C. Seymour, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981; see Aude Mairey, "L'aristocratie anglaise face aux Lollards", in *Le Salut par les armes. Noblesse et défense de l'orthodoxie (xiii^e-xviii^e s.)*, ed. Ariane Boltanski and Franck Mercier, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011, p. 81-92.

⁶⁶ See Karen A. Winstead, *John Capgrave*, op. cit., *passim*.

⁶⁷ Vincent Gillespie, "Chichele's Church: Vernacular Theology in England after Thomas Arundel", in *After Arundel*, op. cit., p. 3-42, at p. 35: "The lexis of all these writers reflects a consciously fostered aureation as part of a self-aware turn to a Latinate English vernacular, perhaps in the face of Lollard calls for a wholesale 'simple' translation of religious materials".

these choices in their full complexity. These choices are linked to numerous factors that are not only rhetorical. The poets of the first half of the fifteenth-century tried to express themselves in a contentious space, aiming to nurture the dialogue between royal and ecclesiastical powers, on the one hand, and between the ruler and political society, on the other. At this precise moment, it seems, their message was more easily communicable in a versified form; at the same time, the use of versified forms has contributed to the construction of a written English, giving it and its speakers its *lettres de noblesse*.