Introduction: valuing the vernacular

> Vulgo – ablativus ponitur adverbialiter – .i. ubique *partout* .i. *quemunement*, *publiquement* vel per vulgum .i. inordinate, incondite, vulgariter. Vulgaris et hoc .gare – .i. popularis, publicus, communis, manifestus .i. *publiques*, *quemuns*. Vulgariter – adverbium – *populairement*, *publiquement*. Vulgaritas .tatis – .i. popularitas, communitas vel publicatio, manifestatio . . . Vulgo .gas .gatum – .i. publicare, manifestare .i. *publier*, *manifester*. Vulgatus .a .um – .i. publicatus, manifestatus.[1]

These definitions of terms relating to 'vulgarity' and the 'vulgar' are taken from the learned Latin–French dictionary which Firmin Le Ver compiled at the Carthusian house of St Honoré at Thuison, near Abbeville, in the first half of the fifteenth century. Public, popular, common, manifest . . . such are the concepts deemed crucial here. *Publicus* should be understood as appertaining to people in general (*ad omnes generaliter*),[2] while *popularis* has the sense of 'belonging to or fit for the common people', 'available to, directed towards the whole community, public'.[3] *Publicatio* has the pre-print culture sense of the transmission of information into 'a public sphere of discussion, debate, news, gossip, and rumour, in which things were generally spoken of and generally known'.[4] The various ways in which these ideas were negotiated in different medieval European languages (in official, learned Latin and in demotic 'vulgars' or vernaculars)[5] and in both 'high' and 'low' cultural situations, are the subject of this book. That is to say, 'vernacular' will be deployed in its fullest, richest sense, to encompass acts of cultural transmission and negotiation (in which translation from one language to another may play a major part, but not inevitably). By such a procedure I hope to access some of the ways in which authority was 'translated', appropriated, disposed, exploited, and indeed challenged by Middle English literature. Each of the following chapters is an essay in the politics of *translatio auctoritatis*.

'Le latin n'est si entendible ne si commun que le language maternel', remarks Jacques Bauchant, commissioned by King Charles V to translate

Elisabeth of Schönau's treatises into French. These works will help Charles, Jacques assures him, 'vostre peuple gouverner et entroduire en science et en bonns meurs par exemple de bonne et ordenee vie'.[6] Jacques was one among many scholarly translators who served the pedagogic and political ambitions of Charles V. The king commanded the production of over thirty translations of authoritative texts, as a crucial 'part of a conscious policy to legitimate the new Valois dynasty',[7] most notable being Nicole Oresme's 'commentated translations' – i.e. vernacular renderings which include scholarly *explication de texte*, largely drawn from Latin commentary tradition but sometimes adding fresh exegesis.[8] Here, then, are 'translations of authority' in several senses of that phrase: renderings in the mother tongue of authoritative Latin *originalia*, writings which had been authorized by no less a personage than King Charles 'the wise', and repositories of authoritative 'scientific' knowledge and ethical doctrine which, having been made common, will enable the populace to live well and be governed well. This vital information is supposedly for the public good and the good of the state – and it certainly does the image of the king much good, since Charles is frequently credited with having initiated the process of *translatio* (here using the term to designate cultural transfer in general, which in this case involved language-transfer in particular). For example, Nicole Oresme praises him for having Aristotle's 'moral books', the *Ethics* and *Politics*, translated into French 'pour le bien commun'.[9] Discourse concerning what Geoffrey Chaucer once termed 'commune profit'[10] is a major feature of many of the translations associated with Charles V. And here 'common' functions as a prestige term, which marks the coherence of a nation, united under God and its king.

Furthermore, that nation has its own language, and French imperial success guarantees the authority of French. 'French is a noble language, used by people of great intelligence, ability and prudence', Nicole Oresme remarks in the introduction to his *Livre de éthiques d'Aristote*.[11] Admittedly, 'Latin is at present (*a present*)' the more perfect and richer language (*plus parfait et plus habondant*). But this state of affairs need not continue. French is the 'younger language', the clear implication being that it can, and will, mature, become the latest beneficiary of the *translatio studii*. A comparable vision informs Dante's *Convivio*, wherein an attack is launched on those who believe that a long passage of time is necessary for the creation of nobility.[12] On the contrary, Dante argues, the potential for *gentilezza* is present in each and every one of us, whether aristocrat or churl, but we ourselves have to actualize that potential by behaving nobly. *É gentilezza dovunqu'è vertute*.[13] Because mankind has a

common origin or root, any human being can cultivate the virtues and thus attain the true nobility, which is nobility of soul. This sort of argument can, very easily, be appropriated in an affirmation of the worthiness of the Italian language. A language does not have to be ancient (like Latin) to be noble; through careful cultivation it can fulfil its great potential. Thereby the *prezioso volgare* can achieve perfect literary nobility – and also authority, which stems from reason (whether divine or human) rather than from age.

Dante does not spell all of that out, but it is, I believe, quite implicit in what he actually does say.[14] After all, the *Convivio* is a spectacular example of vernacular hermeneutics, whereby several of Dante's own *canzone* are authorized even as they are treated through techniques of exegesis which for generations had been reserved for the Latin *auctores*. It could well be titled *De vulgari auctoritate* – to bring out the parallelism with Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, wherein the potential of eloquence in the vernacular is justified. *Nobilior est vulgaris*? Contrasting Latin with the vernacular, Dante argues that the vernacular is indeed the more noble language, giving three reasons. It was the first to be used by mankind (the language spoken in Eden was a vernacular), the whole world makes use of it (all the world's different vernaculars here being understood collectively), and it is natural for us to use (i.e. it is that language 'which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds'), as opposed to Latin, which can only be acquired 'through dedication to a lengthy course of study'.[15] Here, in *De vulgari eloquentia*, the vernacular is valued at Latin's expense.[16] Vulgarization rarely gets more prestigious than this.

However, there is nothing in the corpus of Middle English texts which corresponds to either of Dante's literary-theoretical treatises or Oresme's commentated translations, and neither King Richard II of England nor his Lancastrian successors attempted to emulate the 'state hermeneutics' cultivated by the Valois dynasty. Richard II was evidently impressed by the ceremonial practices of the French court, and took as his second wife (or child-bride, to be more exact) the daughter of Charles VI.[17] But he failed to act on the model (exemplified to perfection by Charles V) of the wise, bookish king, whose good governance and nation-building involved the cultivation of the national language and the provision therein of authoritative books which engendered 'affeccion et amour au bien publique', to borrow another phrase from Nicole Oresme.[18] Why was this? Answers are sought in Chapter 1. The basic hypothesis offered there is that vernacular hermeneutics (being practised outside the schools and written *in vulgari*) needed high-level sponsorship to thrive, but the prospect for that

happening in Britain was remote at a time when books in English were generally coming under suspicion, due to fears prompted by the Wycliffite heresy. Indeed, there was good reason for that suspicion since the formal exegetical treatises that were produced were Wycliffite in origin or at least open to infiltration by Wycliffite ideas.

The following chapters complicate this picture considerably. Orthodox Middle English hermeneutics flourished in contexts other than those of the formal exegetical treatise (on texts both sacred and secular) or the commentated translation: witness, for example, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (cf. Chapters 2 and 3) and *The Book of Margery Kempe* (cf. Chapter 5). And while the differences between the textual cultures of Britain and continental Europe highlighted in Chapter 1 are highly significant, it should not be concluded that Britain was mired in its own, solipsistic 'English heresy' to the exclusion of influence from across the Channel, that it lacked awareness of continental heresies, or that it failed to participate in theological disputes which were current in continental schools and universities. Chapter 2 investigates how issues of international concern relating to unusual forms of baptism and the possibility of salvation outside the Christian Church are handled in the poetry of Chaucer and Langland, with the emphasis on the presentation of the pagan emperor Trajan in *Piers Plowman*, which has provoked considerable controversy in recent criticism.

Those are not the only Ricardian poets whose works have been searched for signs of 'Nominalist' influence or 'Pelagian' infiltration; the *Gawain*-poet has received much attention of this kind. Some of the interpretations seem heavily overdetermined, as when certain theological positions and depictions which, arguably, are quite commonplace in medieval theology, or at least explicable with reference to uncontentious traditions, become identified as distinctively 'Nominalist'. For example, the remoteness of God 'from the narrator's world' in *Pearl* has been deemed 'similar to the God of the *Pelagiani moderni*', the assumption being that 'the thinking of men like Ockham, Buckingham, and Holcot implied a God who is distant from His creation'.[19] But one need not turn to 'Neopelagian' theology in quest of a God realized in terms of distance and remoteness – *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the entire Dionysian tradition in which it participates, afford ample precedent. And anyway, it is highly dubious if the medieval schoolmen who deployed the dialectic of God's two powers would have seen the *potentia absoluta* as being segregated from the *potentia ordinaria* to the extent required for the postulation of a God 'distant from His creation'. I believe they would have been horrified by the suggestion that the divine power was divided and divisive: they saw themselves as dealing

with two perceptions (from the human viewpoint) of one and the same power.[20] In any case, several writers on *Pearl* have been sensitive to the presence in the poem of a grace-imbued theology of God as a 'frende ful fyin' (1204), 'a divinity more consistent with the Augustinian tradition'.[21] So, if any Neopelagianism does indeed lurk in the poem, it definitely does not constitute the work's entire theological meaning and message. Either the poem affords credibility to two conflicting positions, one which emphasizes human merit and the other which emphasizes divine grace[22] (a harsher judgement might claim it is irreconcilably divided against itself), or there is one law for the unreliable narrator and another for the better-informed author. Or, maybe we are simply barking up the wrong tree. At any rate, I see no reason to leap to the conclusion that the *Gawain*-poet 'knew the works of Robert Holcot well enough for his imagination to be deeply formed by them',[23] and to postulate further that the poet was the friar's 'student (perhaps informally), whether in one of the universities, or more probably at Northampton or in the household of the bishop of Durham, either in that city or in London'.[24] That is to move beyond historically informed literary criticism to enter the realm of the historical novel.

My own reaction to the possibility of a Ricardian poetics of sceptical fideism is one of total scepticism.[25] There was indeed a well-established 'virtuous heathen scene' in Middle English literature, as Frank Grady has recently argued, but its scope was by no means determined by the doctrines attributed to the *Pelagiani moderni*. Furthermore, 'righteous heathen stories take on lives of their own once the topic escapes into the vernacular realm', and considerable 'weight' must be given to the 'curious and paradoxical rhetorical form[s]' in which they are couched.[26] In Chapter 2 I note that Chaucer engages in elaborate rhetorical convolutions to avoid explicit comment on the fate of the souls of his virtuous heathen, while expressing admiration for their philosophical insight and moral virtues. Langland's position is (typically) more shifting, elusive, maybe even evasive: but there is no reason to doubt its fundamental orthodoxy. On my reading, he stands as a 'radical conservative' thinker who brings out certain complexities and profundities of late medieval orthodox Christianity as never before – hence the epithet 'radical' is utterly appropriate. In Langland's handling of virtuous heathen in general and Trajan in particular, the business of Latin theology is being continued in the vernacular, with exceptional intellectual – and, I would add, emotional – sensitivity. And, by being made the repository of such compelling analysis, the vernacular is highly valued. Here is a veritable *translatio auctoritatis*.

But that certainly does not mean that Langland is valuing the vernacular more highly than he does Latin, that he believes English can afford value, bestow significance, offer resolution, in ways or to extents that Latin, the official theological language, cannot. Hence I must quibble with a reading of Langland's 'Tearing of the Pardon' episode (the subject of Chapter 3) which has been offered by Nicholas Watson, a scholar who has done more than anyone else in recent years to focus attention on the challenges of 'vernacular theology'.[27] In *Piers Plowman* B VII, Watson suggests, the priest figure devotes 'much energy' to proving that 'Piers's merciful vernacular Pardon is truer than the priest's harsh quotation from the Athanasian creed'. But that quotation from the Athanasian Creed *is* the sum total of the original Latin text of the 'Pardon' which Piers has received from Saint Truth. The priest has provided an English translation for the unlettered Plowman and his companions – and this translation is accurate, even though the priest's patronizing, scoffing attitude is highly unfortunate, to say the least. But that is a different matter. The status of vernacular discourse is simply not an issue here. By the same token, when Trajan exclaims 'Baw for bokes!' (B XI. 140) he doesn't care what language they're written in.

What *is* a major issue, as we attempt to understand B VII, is present-day suspicion of the late medieval theory and practice of indulgences (called 'pardons' *vulgariter*),[28] this being the literal base on which Langland constructs his allegorical superstructure. Wyclif had complained that in issuing indulgences the pope arrogates an extraordinary amount of power to himself, acting as the judge of all souls, including those in purgatory, heaven and hell. But that power is God's alone. The Almighty is perfectly capable of dispensing reward Himself, without the help of any pope – and besides, the pope cannot judge who is worthy in God's sight. Then again, if the pope's power in such matters is infinite, why does he not use it to save all the souls he could?[29] Martin Luther went much farther than that, finding in indulgences an easy target for his reformist rage. But one did not have to be a Lollard or a Lutheran to feel concern about how the system of pardoning was being justified and what was being done in the Church's name. Controversy was rife, with a surprising range of opinions and activities being accommodated within an orthodoxy which was far more capacious than sometimes has been claimed.

In Chapter 3 I try to bring out something of that capaciousness, and present Langland as a passionate yet utterly orthodox participant in a debate which had been carried on in Latin for generations, and which was to continue to trouble theologians for a long time to come (a 'radical conservative' approach indeed). I draw particularly on the justifications of

indulgences offered by Sts Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. Aquinas's views are of special interest inasmuch as they are copiously quoted in a Latin treatise written shortly after the fifth Canterbury jubilee (1420), perhaps by Richard Godmersham (who was appointed head of Canterbury College by Archbishop Arundel in 1403), which stridently defends the authenticity of a generous plenary indulgence allegedly granted by Pope Honorius III on the occasion of the translation on 7 July 1220 of the martyr Thomas à Becket. Anyone who attacks this indulgence, declares Richard (assuming he is indeed the author) is sinning against the Holy Spirit – specific mention being made of those who are 'infected with the execrable dogma of the carping Lollards'.[30] Furthermore, the relevant discussions of Aquinas and Bonaventure are cited at some length in Wyclif's attack on indulgences in *De ecclesia*;[31] here, it would seem, are the views he knew he had to beat. Challenging a current tendency to make such proto-protestant ideology the basis of literary-critical (and indeed moral) judgements concerning the artistic representation of late medieval religiosity, my reading affords all due respect to the power of a doctrine which – offering hope, reassurance, and communality – captured the Catholic imagination for several centuries, yet which was also a source of anxiety and unease, feelings which Langland conveys brilliantly.

What makes Langland's treatment particularly radical is the extent to which he seems willing to acquiesce in aspects of pardoning which were deemed dubious in his day. Professional theologians complained that the vulgar herd did not understand that an indulgence could not liberate from both punishment and guilt, *a pena et a culpa*: only priestly absolution could effect release from the latter. In fact, this comprehension was by no means limited to the ill-educated. Hence in Chapter 3 I speak of a vernacular theology of indulgences *a pena et a culpa*, which was shared by learned and lewd, clerical and lay, and cut across the boundaries of language. Another cause for professional concern was the practice of remaining at home yet claiming the benefit of an indulgence which, in normal circumstances, required much physical effort and travel. The experts found this custom difficult to justify, and it was deemed a fit subject for satire. However, Langland took these slices of life as he knew it, accepted them as historical/literal sense, without explicit questioning; rather he seeks answers in their *sensus spiritualis*. The ultimate solution to the problems posed by *Piers Plowman* B VII seems to lie in the doctrine of the Atonement, the reconciliation of mankind to God through the death of His Son, this being the best pardon of all. But, in the 'Tearing of the Pardon' episode, Langland merely gestures towards that doctrine, aspects of which will be clarified later in the poem.

We must wait for those future steps. For now, the Pardon (i.e. a passage from the Athanasian Creed) is torn apart, the elaborate allegorical edifice in which it featured disowned – and this restless, relentless poem begins its quest afresh.

For her part, Margery Kempe elicits *sensus spiritualis* in two Biblical texts which were of crucial importance for her sense of religious calling, Genesis 1:28 and Luke 11:27–8. The former *auctoritas*, 'be fruitful and multiply', could be used in criticizing women who refused to be contained by their reproductive function, while the latter, beginning 'Blessed is the womb that bore thee', apparently denigrated the material motherhood of the Virgin Mary in particular and womankind in general, in face of the higher calling intimated by Christ's words, 'blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it'. For a woman to engage in vernacular hermeneutic activity of any kind, let alone of Biblical texts which went to the very heart of the matter of women's roles in Christian society, was a quite daring thing to do in the early 1400s. And inevitably, male interrogators sought to discover if Margery fitted some supposed heretical template or other. In Chapter 5 I explore the possibility that Wycliffite theology affords reasons why Margery's questioners should have been interested in those two specific passages, concluding that a sufficient, perhaps even a satisfying, explanation may indeed be found there. But, going beyond those parameters, I wish to place vernacular English conundrums within the wider European context in which they belong, an ambition which permeates Chapter 2 also.

This sort of enterprise has recently been supported by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton's *Books under Suspicion*, which offers a vision of 'a far less insular England than we are used to seeing – an England swept by fierce, invigorating, often stormy theological winds from across the Channel'.[32] Hence I ask if the 'gret clerke' who asked Margery what she thought of Genesis 1:28 could have been prompted by fears concerning either Catharism or the Heresy of the Free Spirit. Of course, modern scholars are convinced that the former never took root in English soil, and that the latter did not exist as a heresy at all. But Margery's interrogators, lacking the resources of modern academe, did not know that. Medieval English clerics had read about those supposed heresies; so, in that sense such subversive thought-systems (or what were perceived as such) had indeed entered England. They existed in the minds of certain English clerics – and perhaps the English clerics who quizzed Margery may be included among that number.

I conclude, however, that no obvious frisson of those fierce continental winds is evident in Margery's response. And, indeed, the 'gret clerke' may not have been seeking out heresy (whether Lollard, Cathar, Free Spirit, or

whatever) at all. A more mundane explanation is possible. Margery did not wish to subvert orthodox constructions of marriage; she was quite willing to see other women endure in that state, while wanting something better for herself. Hence her desire to 'spiritualize' her own social situation as a married woman, to interpret potentially troublesome Scriptural passages in 'gostly' terms which endorsed her talking about the things of God.[33] But, for some contemporaries, her chosen mission posed a threat to the social order and the security of marriage; hence Margery was seen as a sort of female Pied Piper who would give men's wives fancy ideas about their religious potential and lead them away with her on her wanderings. Perhaps that was the threat she was suspected of posing in the episode under discussion.

'Perhaps' is a crucial word in that sentence because throughout Chapter 5 I am seeking to explore possibilities rather than claiming interpretive certainty – which is impossible to achieve, I believe, since *The Book of Margery Kempe* has given us so little to go on. Whatever the facts of Margery's fascinating encounter with the 'gret clerke' may be, this general proposition may be ventured: disruptive Margery certainly was, but heretical she was not. However, the charge of heresy came quickly to the lips of those who wanted her to live the life that other women do; it was all too easy to perceive and present her 'public vernacular ecclesiopolitical discourse'[34] as a form of heterodoxy. In response Margery offered self-authorizing exegesis in her 'vulgar' tongue. Once again, we see the business of Latin hermeneutics being continued in the vernacular, English being the only language of which Margery had full command, as a woman with little, if any, Latin.[35] Her attempt at *translatio auctoritatis* is motivated by desire to rise above and beyond the 'common state of women', and join the company of those who had been specially elected and privileged by God.

What Margery was up against is made abundantly clear in Chapter 4, which discusses views concerning 'women priests' attributed to the Welsh Lollard Walter Brut, who was tried by John Trefnant, bishop of Hereford, during the period 1391–3. Only a mere two pages (approximately) of the 173 pages devoted to Brut's excursus in Capes's edition concern female ministry. But they are the centre of attention in four *quaestiones* preserved in London, British Library, MS 31, presumably the work of members of the team that Trefnant assembled for Brut's trial. My discussion focuses on two of them, *Utrum mulieres sunt ministri ydonei ad conficiendum eukaristie sacramentum* (fols. 196v–205r) and *Utrum mulieres conficiunt vel conficere possunt* (fols. 218r–223r).[36] It cannot be emphasized enough that these texts are not the work of Brut himself but rather the writings of orthodox theologians

who have expanded the heretic's own views (for which Trefnant's Register is our only reliable source) in order to refute them the more effectively. I find this 'expansionist' explanation of the *quaestiones* more convincing than the rival hypothesis, viz. that their authors worked with a substantial body of material (no longer extant) produced by Brut himself, which they closely followed before proceeding to refute. The additional materials which bulk out the *quaestiones* are more comprehensible as *amplificatio* by professional theologians, with substantial academic resources at their disposal,[37] of what Brut himself had said, as represented in those brief documents of his own authorship which have survived in the Register.

This raises fascinating issues concerning professionalism versus (relative) amateurism, élite versus 'popular' culture (i.e. culture 'of the people'),[38] official versus unofficial intellectualism, non-institutional versus non- (or even anti-) institutional theology. In short, the issue of what may justly be deemed 'vernacular', and how that vernacular may be valued, is here to the fore. Focusing for the moment on linguistic matters, it is important to consider the implications of the fact that Walter Brut himself wrote in Latin: that is the language in which, responding to Trefnant's demand, he recorded his views, and that is the form in which they have been preserved in the bishop's Register. Here is no parish-pump philosopher, but a literate (i.e. Latinate) layman who participated in the authoritative, and authority-conferring, methodologies of learned discourse.[39] Furthermore, and leaving linguistic matters aside for the moment, his views on women priests can hardly be termed 'demotic', inasmuch as they never became major tenets of Lollard doctrine. (It is one of the deep ironies of the history of Lollardy that Brut's opponents probably generated far more heretical doctrine on women priests than their opponent had done.)

What is abundantly clear is that Lollardy cannot be regarded simply and exclusively as the 'English Heresy'.[40] And the arch-heresiarch himself, John Wyclif, made no attempt to champion his 'vulgar' tongue (to the best of our knowledge). No justification of the translation of that most authoritative of all books, 'The Book of Life', may be found anywhere in Wyclif's voluminous theological writings, though for centuries he has been lauded as the *fons et origio* of the first English Bible. Furthermore, not a scrap of Middle English survives which can with any confidence be attributed to him, despite the fact that his followers generated a vast corpus of vernacular theology. It seems quite clear, then, that positioning Latin and vernacular theology in a relationship of sharp opposition travesties the complexity of the situation. Thinking back to the terms of reference of Firmin le Ver's definition of *vulgaritas* and related words, we may recall the