TRANSLATIONS OF AUTHORITY IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

In *Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature*, leading critic Alastair Minnis presents the fruits of a long-term engagement with the ways in which crucial ideological issues were deployed in vernacular texts. The concept of the vernacular is seen as possessing a value far beyond the category of language – as encompassing popular beliefs and practices which could either confirm or contest those authorized by church and state institutions.

Minnis addresses the crisis for vernacular translation precipitated by the Lollard heresy; the minimal engagement with Nominalism in late fourteenth-century poetry; Langland's views on indulgences; the heretical theology of Walter Brut; Margery Kempe's self-promoting Biblical exegesis; and Chaucer's tales of suspicious saints and risible relics. These discussions disclose different aspects of 'vernacularity', enabling a fuller understanding of its complexity and potency.

ALASTAIR MINNIS is the Douglas Tracy Smith Professor of English at Yale University. Recent authored works include *Magister Amoris: The 'Roman de la Rose' and Vernacular Hermeneutics* (2001), and *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (2007). In addition, he has edited or co-edited fourteen other books, including (with Ian Johnson) *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, II: *The Middle Ages* (2005). He is also the General Editor of Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature.

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Valuing the Vernacular

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To Jacques, with affection and admiration

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Preface

> I thought of three things in writing an extensive introduction and a series of notes. It was a literary joke – hence I referred twice in *Slave Song* to T. S. Eliot, because Eliot had also joked and provided a kind of spoof gloss to *The Waste Land*. On another level, we had been arguing for a long time that Creole was a distinctive language. We made a lot of politics out of that. It was part of the nationalism in the 60s. We had our own airline, environment, landscape, and fruits, so we should have our own language. If we were going to take that seriously we should provide translations to our poems. But the third reason is the most serious . . . I wanted to question the relationship between the work of art and the critical industry that arises because of that work of art.[1]

Here the Guyanan British poet David Dabydeen is explaining why, in *Slave Song* (1984), he provided his Creole poems with translations and a commentary (comprising an introduction and notes) in Standard English. His intentions would have been utterly comprehensible to those fourteenth-century Italian writers who sought to establish an illustrious vernacular in face of the hegemony of Latin, which in their day enjoyed the prestigious position occupied by Standard English in Dabydeen's Britain. I am thinking not only of Dante (who managed to praise the vernacular in Latin and Latin in the vernacular) but also of Francesco da Barberino (1264–1348), lawyer and lover of Provençal poetry. Francesco's *Documenti d'Amore* is, like Dabydeen's *Slave Song*, a tripartite work, wherein the central text, an Italian poem, is accompanied by a literal Latin translation and a substantial Latin commentary.[2] Thus Dabydeen's *confrères*, in part fired by the Italian city-state version of 'nationalism', exploited the interpretive conventions of the 'critical industry' to aggrandize their mother language. Thereby the vernacular was valued.

In late medieval England, however, there appear to have been no formal hermeneutic enterprises of that kind, or any extensive 'commentated

translations' of authoritative works, whether secular and sacred, on the model of those patronized by King Charles V of France. Such Middle English hermeneutic activity as did exist, and has survived, was largely of Lollard origin, or at least susceptible of infiltration by Lollardy. Perhaps it was fears of association with the 'English heresy' that inhibited the development of a substantial orthodox commentary-tradition in Middle English. Despite such fears, however, Middle English hermeneutics flourished by other means and in other forms – witness William Langland's attempts to find *sensus spiritualis* in the system of issuing indulgences or 'pardons', as demotically understood and practised, and Margery Kempe's allegorical constructions of female authority from quite unpromising materials, Biblical texts which threatened to keep women confined and contained within material marriage. In confronting such issues, along with those relating to the salvation of 'virtuous heathen' who lacked the benefit of conventional baptism, Middle English carried on the business of Latin intellectual culture. Here is a veritable *translatio auctoritatis* – a translation of authoritative discourse and methodology into the 'vulgar' tongue.

However, the relationship between Latin and vernacular posited in this book is more elaborate than that. It includes the notion of vernacular (in the sense of unofficial, non-institutional, disordered) theology being pursued in Latin, as professional theologians – taking their cue from the Lollard layman Walter Brut, who himself could write Latin – engaged in non-orthodox exegesis in the service of orthodoxy. Further, it allows for a concept of vernacular culture which transcends language to encompass acts of cultural transfer, negotiation, appropriation, and indeed resistance – within which wider context language-transfer could play a major role, but not necessarily. David Dabydeen declared himself attracted by the powerful, visceral 'vulgarity' of the Creole language as used by Caribbean canecutters, which was the linguistic inspiration of *Slave Song*, but he looked beyond language to 'the vulgarity of the people, the vulgarity of their way of life'.[3] And that is what I attempt to do in my final chapter, where, in respect of the cult of saints, 'the informal, colloquial or distinctive' religiosity of the so-called 'common people' is investigated, though the caveat must be entered that the clergy often participated in, promoted, and/or sought to control the vernacular practices which are my subject. Here, taking my point of departure from Chaucer's Pardoner, I try to access demotic activities and attitudes through medieval humour, and seek means of understanding medieval humour in demotic activities and attitudes.

In sum, *Translations of Authority* addresses the value and status of 'the vernacular' in the translation of, and engagement with, authoritative

Latin learning. Further, it challenges the appropriateness of the distinction between Latin and vernacular (can Medieval Latin itself not be deemed a vernacular or a group of vernaculars?), and proposes that the very term 'vernacular' has a value which goes far beyond the category of language, to encompass popular cultural beliefs and practices which engaged in complex relationships with those authorized by church and state institutions. This book comprises a series of essays which address those interconnecting topics, four which have been published before – though in rather different (and shorter) versions, for I have substantially revised them for inclusion in this volume. I am grateful to the following presses for allowing me to re-use the relevant materials.

'Absent Glosses; A Crisis of Vernacular Commentary in Late-Medieval England?', in William Fahrenbach (ed.), *Essays in Medieval Studies, 20: Texts and Commentaries. The 2003 Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association* (published by the West Virginia University Press for the Illinois Medieval Association, 2004), pp. 1–17.

'Looking for a Sign: The Quest for Nominalism in Chaucer and Langland', in Alastair Minnis, C. C. Morse and T. Turville-Petre (eds.), *Essays on Ricardian Literature in Honour of J. A. Burrow* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 142–78.

'Piers' Protean Pardon: The Letter and Spirit of Langland's Theology of Indulgences', in Anne Marie D'Arcy and Alan J. Fletcher (eds.), *Studies in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Texts in Honour of John Scattergood* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005), pp. 218–40.

'Making Bodies: Confection and Conception in Walter Brut's Vernacular Theology', *The Medieval Translator*, 8 (2003), 1–16. Edited by R. Voaden, René Tixier, Teresa Sanchez Roura, and Jenny Rebecca Rytting.

The present compilation would have been impossible without the good offices of Cambridge University Press. I owe a special debt to Dr Linda Bree, with whom I have had the pleasure of working, mainly on Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, for around nine years. Warm thanks are also due to the following scholars who advised and inspired me as I mulled over the fascinating, and sometimes bizarre, medieval problems and puzzles which are presented below: David Aers, J. W. Binns, Sarah Blick, J. A. Burrow, Rita Copeland, William J. Courtenay, Mary Dove, W. G. East, George Ferzoco, Vincent Gillespie, Richard Firth Green, Ralph Hanna III, Anne Hudson, Ian Johnson, Richard Kieckhefer, Gary Macy, Robyn Malo, Derek Pearsall, Stephen Penn, Jim Rhodes, Robert Shaffern, James Simpson, Robert N. Swanson, Michael Vandussen, David Wallace, Nicholas Watson, and Roger Wright. When I was writing Chapter 6,

Sharon Collingwood helped me untangle some knotty French passages, and Dr Sarah Minnis explained the medical complexities of the urogenital tract. Katherine Minnis made me aware of the self-exegesis of David Dabydeen with which this Preface began. During my time as a Lilly Fellow in Religion and the Humanities at the National Humanities Center (January – May 2006) much progress was made on essential revision and fresh research. The incomparable library resources and research support provided by Yale University provided ideal conditions in which to complete the project.

I dedicate this book, with affection and admiration, to Jacques Berthoud, who was head of the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York when I was appointed Professor of Medieval Literature there in 1987. (Indeed, Jacques chaired the Department for some seventeen years – no small feat.) It was during my time at York that I first got interested in many of the issues which are discussed below. And I want to pay tribute to Jacques for all he did to make its university a place wherein creative thought and teaching were possible. While not suffering foolish things gladly, Jacques ensured that the English Department thrived within the enervating audit culture which was a consequence of Thatcherism. Yet he retained and affirmed his humanist vision of the importance of literature within the cultural life of the nation – and indeed of all nations, for here is an ardent internationalist. Thank you, Jacques, for everything you taught me.

Abbreviations

Alberti opera	St Albert the Great, *Opera omnia*, ed. A. Borgnet (Paris, 1890–9)
Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*	St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* Blackfriars edn (London and New York, 1964–81)
Aquinatis opera	St Thomas Aquinas, *Opera omnia* (Parma, 1852–72)
Biblia glossata	*Biblia sacra cum Glossa ordinaria et Postilla Nicolai Lyrani* (Antwerp, 1617)
BMK	*The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge, 2004); book and chapter numbers are followed by Windeatt's page-numbering
Bonaventurae opera	St Bonaventure, *Opera omnia* (Quaracchi, 1882–1902)
Brepols Database of Latin Dictionaries	Brepols Database of Latin Dictionaries, consulted online at http://clt.brepolis.net/dld/start.asp?sOwner=menu
Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*	Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia, 2007)
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum continuatio medievalis

CHLCMA	Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, II: *The Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2005)
ChR	*The Chaucer Review*
EETS OS	Early English Text Society, Original Series
EETS ES	Early English Text Society, Extra Series
Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*	Anne Hudson, *Lollards and their Books* (London and Ronceverte, 1985)
Hudson, *Premature Reformation*	Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford, 1988)
Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion*	Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late-Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN, 2006)
Levy (ed.), *Companion to Wyclif*	Ian Christopher Levy (ed.), *A Companion to John Wyclif, Late Medieval Theologian* (Leiden and Boston, 2006)
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn *et al.*, in *Middle English Compendium* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998–), online edition, http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/med/
Migne, *PL*	*Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1841–61)
Minnis, *Fallible Authors*	Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia, 2007)
Netter, *Doctrinale*	Thomas Netter, *Doctrinale antiquitatum fidei catholicae ecclesiae* (Venice, 1757–59; repr. Farnborough, Hants., 1967)
OLD	*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, combined edn, repr. with corrections, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford, 1996)

Oxford Reference Online	Oxford Reference Online, consulted at http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/GLOBAL.html
Registrum Johannis Trefnant, ed. Capes	*Registrum Johannis Trefnant*, ed. W. W. Capes, Canterbury and York Series, 20 (London, 1916)
SAC	*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*
Vincent, *The Holy Blood*	Nicholas Vincent, *The Holy Blood: King Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic* (Cambridge, 2001)

All Chaucer references are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, general ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford, 1988). For the B-text of *Piers Plowman* I have used the edition of A. V. C. Schmidt (London and Vermont, 1995); for the C-text, Derek Pearsall's edition (Exeter, 1994). References to the *Gawain/Pearl*-poet are to *The Poems of the 'Pearl' Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter, 1987). My translations of Biblical quotations by medieval authors generally follow Challoner's revision of the Douay Bible, as being close to the Latin Vulgate, but where a quotation differs markedly from the accepted Vulgate text, or where I am using a modern translation of the medieval text in question, I have followed the variant.