

A Note on Lydgate's *Corious Flour of Rethorik*

by

Bette L. Daniel*

In his prologue to *Troy Book*, *Lydgate* explains that he has been ". . . commaunded the drery pitus fate / Of hem of Troye in englysche to translate." (105-106)¹ Thereafter, he is preoccupied with a literary problem of immediate concern to many another medievalist, namely, that of adapting ancient myth and legend to the vernacular. In some ways, his comments on translation echo those of Dante, who, in the course of justifying the vernacular in the *Convivio*, wrote a brilliant defense of the mother tongue, portions of which may help clarify some of the problems encountered by Lydgate in the composition of *Troy Book*.

Dante's first task is to distinguish between the uses of Latin and the vernacular tongue on the basis of suitability to subject, guided always by a sense of *utility* which he thinks cannot exist unless an author's work is offered and received cheerfully, unless it creates a friendship between giver and receiver, and unless it helps improve the human condition.² He makes no attempt to discredit the use of Latin as some might have expected him to do; rather, his affection for his native tongue is scarcely greater (if at all greater) than his respect for Latin. Actually, he is interested in the utilitarian aspects of these two tongues as he shows what he considers to be the appropriateness of Latin to given subjects, and of the vernacular to others.³ He is convinced that, when properly chosen and applied, each tongue will perform its given tasks satisfactorily. Consequently, in Latin he recognizes the inherent qualities of beauty, goodness, and nobility, and defines *beauty* as that condition of language ". . . in which the pure parts correspond most perfectly as they should do."⁴ He believes that Latin achieves this state of beauty in language more readily than the vernacular, governed as it is by *art*, the vernacular by *custom*.⁵ He concludes, therefore, that Latin would not have fulfilled the commands which he would have laid upon it in the *Convivio* (that it would not have been "obedient" to his wishes) as would the vulgar tongue, being easily understood by the ". . . lettered and unlettered alike."⁶ Thus, he considers the vernacular more "liberal" than Latin in communicating with members of his own society, because

*Mrs. Daniel is an Instructor in English at Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia. Portions of this study originated in a master's thesis under the direction of Professor Charles E. Walton, Department of English.

¹*Lydgate's Troy Book*, edited by Henry Bergen for EETS in IV Vols. All references to the poem are from this edition, citations by Book and lines.

²W. W. Jackson (tr.), *Dante's Convivio*. All references to the *Convivio* are from this translation, page numbers in parentheses: I.8 (50-52).

³*Conv.* I.8(50-52).

⁴*Conv.* I.5(44-45).

⁵*Conv.* I.5(44-45).

⁶*Conv.* I.7(49).

“. . . it gives to many . . . it gives things useful . . . and it bestows its gift without being asked for it.”⁷ He admits, also, that a “natural affection” for the native tongue influenced his choice of the vernacular:

Natural affection chiefly moves a lover to three things, firstly, to magnify the object loved; secondly, to be jealous for it; thirdly, to defend it, as everyone may see constantly happen.⁸

He also reveals a pride in his native tongue, asserting that men who “. . . praise the vulgar tongue of other nations and disparage their own” are shameful and disgraceful.⁹ At the core of this argument lies his concept of the vernacular as a moving force in the enlightenment of society:

This shall be a new light and a new sun, which shall rise when the old sun shall set, and shall shine on those who are in darkness and mist because of the old sun which gives no light to them.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Dante was aware of the unstable features of the vernacular, observing that “. . . if a short time changes the language, a longer time changes it more,”¹¹ a thought which evokes his following significant commentary upon the state of translations:

And this is the reason why Homer has not been translated from the Greek into Latin like other writings which the Greeks have bequeathed to us; and this is the reason why the verses of the Psalter have none of the sweetness and music of harmony, for they were translated from Hebrew into Greek and from Greek into Latin, and in the first translation all that sweetness disappeared.¹²

It is probably worth noting that Dante’s contemporary, Petrarch, was also concerned with the many unsuccessful attempts at translating Homer and other ancients, as he explains in his so-called “letter” to Homer:

For that little book which commonly passes as thine, though it is clearly taken from thee and is inscribed with thy name, is nevertheless not thine.¹³

Since, in accepting a commission to write *Troy Book*, Lydgate was faced with similar problems, it remains to be seen how he approached the task of translating a Latin work into the English vernacular.

His prologue to *Troy Book* opens with a conventional invocation to the gods, in which he appeals, first, to Mars:

. . . be myn helpe in this grete nede
To do socour my stile to directe
And of my penne the tracys to correcte
(Pro.28-30)

⁷Conv. I.8(53).

⁸Conv. I.10(56).

⁹Conv. I.11(57).

¹⁰Conv. I.13(66).

¹¹Conv. I.5(43-44); see Alfred Ewert, “Dante’s Theory of Diction,” *MHRA*, XXXI (November, 1959), 19.

¹²Conv. I.7(49).

¹³Mario E. Cosenza (tr.), *Petrarch’s Letters to Classical Authors, Fam.*, XXIV.12 (149).

Here, his use of *stile* and *tracys* shows his desire to be correct in form, as well as accurate in his presentation of the details of the story. Next, he invokes the aid of Othea, the Goddess of Wisdom, and of Calliope, the Goddess with the Melodic Voice, asking that they show him compassion should he, in the future, chance to *erre* in his translation (*Pro.67-69*), once again emphasizing his determination to adhere to the truth in rendering the Troy legend into the vernacular.

At this point, he openly disclaims any thoughts of personal glory or praise in assuming the rôle of translator, explaining that it was the desire of his young lord, the Prince of Wales, that he put into English Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, adding that this young Prince always had found much

. . . Ioye and gret deynte
 To rede in bokys of antiquite,
 To fyn only, vertu for to swe
 Be example of hem, and also for to eschewe
 The cursyd vice of slouthe and ydelnesse.
 (*Pro.79-83*)

It appears, therefore, that the Prince, ". . . eldest sone of the noble kyng, / Henri the firþe," was a moralist in his literary tastes and, as such, was something like his father: "The rotys vertu þus can the frute renewe." (*Pro.98*) For that matter, so is Lydgate, by imputation, having accepted the commission on these terms. Of particular interest, however, are the young lord's reasons for selecting Guido's work as Lydgate's model for the translation:

By-cause he wolde that to hyze and lowe
 The noble story openly wer knowe
 In oure tonge, aboute in euery age,
 And y-writen as well in oure langage
 As in latyn and in frensche it is;
 That of the story þe trouth[e] we nat mys
 No more than doth eche other nacioun:
 This was the fyn of his entencion.
 (*Pro.111-118*)

An enthusiasm for learning and a strong sense of national pride, therefore, are at the root of Prince Henry's request that the much-admired Troy story be made available in English (as it was in Latin and French) to all of his people, both *hize and lowe*, for its enobling qualities and inherent *trouthe*. Thus, the "liberality" of the vernacular is to serve Lydgate as it served Dante and others in its appeal to the lettered and unlettered alike and in its guarantee that none will *mys* the *trouthe*.

In discussing some of the problems of the translator, Lydgate, first, acknowledges that ancient authors were truthful individuals through whose efforts the record of man has been preserved:

For in her honde they hilde for a staf
 The trouthe only, whyche thei han compyled
 Vn-to this fyn, that we wer nat begyled
 of necligence thorouȝ forȝettilnesse.
 (*Pro.152-155*)

He also knows how great is man's debt to these authors who have been the sole means of perpetuating the truth:

For ner[e] writers, al wer out of mynde,
 Nat story only, but of nature and kynde
 That trewe knowyng schulde haue gon to wrak,
 And from science oure wittes put a-bak
 (Pro.159-161)

Here, he distinguishes between fiction (*story*) and fact (*nature and kynde*), further maintaining that ancient works are like a ". . . merour only to oure mynde, / To seen eche thing trewly as it was, / More bryzt and clere þan in any glas." (Pro.168-170) He also observes that, because of the sustaining power of literature, heroes of the past have not perished: "For vn-to vs her bokes represent / With-out[e] feynynge þe wei þat þei went / In her daies, whan thei wer alyue." (Pro.177-179) For him, books are the records of man's past endeavors and, hence, great repositories of noble actions. Therefore, he reminds his fellow men to live their lives with care at all times:

For after dethe, pleyonly as it is,
 Clerkis wil write, and excepte noon,
 The pley[n]e trouthe whan a man is goon.
 (Pro.192-195)

He believes that these records should teach man to ". . . be his live in al that euer he can / For vertu only eschewe to don amys." (Pro.190-191) On the other hand, he speculates that, had clerks not carefully kept these records,

For-dirked age elles wolde haue slayn
 By lenthe of z̄eris þe noble worthi fame
 Of conquerours, and pleyonly of her name
 For-dymmed eke the lettris aureat,
 And diffaced the palme laureat,
 Whiche þat þei wan by knyztod in her dayes
 (Pro.208-213)

He is convinced, therefore, that it is the ". . . corious flour / Of rethorik" which has enabled man, over the years, to comprehend truth and which will continue to guard truth for all time. (Pro.218-220) For proof, he alludes to numerous redactions of the Troy story, "For clerkys han this story so depeynt, / That deth nor age, by no maner weye, / The trouthe may not maken for to deye" (Pro.256-258) He admits, however, that certain ancient poets misrepresented the facts, recalling that Homer had "lied," although conceding that Homer had been blinded by love. (Pro.282-285) He points out, as well, that Ovid was culpable, because he ". . . poetycally hath cloysd / Falshede with trouthe, þat makeþ men ennosd / To whiche part þat þei schal hem holde" (Pro.299-301) He adds, however, that Ovid was not the only Latin author to mix truth with falsehood, citing the case of Vergil, who was ". . . in party trewe of his writyng, / Exsepte only that hym lyst som whyle / The tracys folwe Omeris stile" (Pro. 306-308)

Lydgate reviews, next, the background of the Troy story, taking into consideration the records of Dares (a Trojan) and Dictys (a Greek), whose accounts of the battles he deems accurate, since these men were eye-witnesses: "Eche in his tonge, by swyche consonaunce, / That in her bokys was no variaunce" (*Pro.*315-316)¹⁴ He recalls, then, a translation of these works by Cornelius of Athens, claiming it to be a true report, although, perhaps, too brief, since it omits much that he himself thinks worthy of emphasis. (*Pro.*317-352) Finally, he comes to "Guydo of Columpna," whose work was recommended by the Prince, and affirms that Guido

. . . enlvmyneth by crafte & cadence
 This noble story with many fresche colour
 Of rethorik, and riche flour
 Of eloquence to make it sownde bet
 He in the story hath ymped in an set,
 That in good feythe I trowe he hath no pere,
 To rekne alle þat write of this matere,
 As in his boke ze may beholde and se.
 (*Pro.*362-369)

Thus, he ends his general prologue, accepting Guido as his model for the translation which follows. In his introduction, therefore, he shows respect for truth. He indicates, as well, that he is fully acquainted with numerous versions of the Troy legend, pointing to some redactions which he thinks faulty, feeling confident, at the same time, that Guido has set the record straight. Furthermore, he seems not to object to the rhetorical devices employed by his predecessors, often appearing to approve of them as "corious floures of rethorik" that freshen and invigorate the ancient works.

By the time of his prefatory remarks to Book II (159-197), however, Lydgate's mood has undergone a radical change, the result, undoubtedly, of his having been criticized for the methods he had employed in Book I. Anxious, now, to defend his translation of Guido, he proceeds to do so in an unexpected way. First, he reiterates that he desires to follow Guido with care, confessing, however, that he finds the task difficult:

I am so dulle, certeyn. þat I ne can
 Folwen Guydo, þat clerke, þat coryous man,
 Whiche in latyn hath be rethorik
 Set so his wordis, þat I can nat be lyke.
 (*II.*169-172)

This thought reflects a new attitude, and in *coryous man*, he seems to be referring to Guido's perfection in rhetoric for which Lydgate admits his own deficiencies. Then, with surprising clarity, he confesses that he had no intentions, in the first place, of following Guido's version *word by word after the maner of grammariens* (apparently alluding to Book I),

¹⁴Lydgate, here, is utilizing a conventional medieval approach to Troy redactions. The matter which he discusses is to be found in similar form in many works in the period: cf., the anonymous *Gest Historiale of the Destruction of Troy*.

and asserts that he did not take upon himself the task of an exact translation: "I toke nat on me þis story to translate . . ." (II.177) He explains, instead, that from the start his method has been to ". . . leve þe wordis and folwe þe sentence." (II.180) This is to say, he has endeavored to "get at the sense" of Guido's line. He mentions, next, his problems in versification, admitting that he is not always perfect in his own metre ("And trouþ of metre I sette also a-syde . . .," II.181), excusing himself in the belief that only the truth was of primary importance. He states that he has tried to reveal ". . . þe trouþe, and lefte coryouste / Boþe of makyng and of metre be . . ." (II.185-186) Again, he insists that it was never his intention to vary greatly from, nor to oppose, Guido: "Nat purposyng to moche for to varie / Nor for to be dyuerse nor contrarie / Vn-to Guydo . . ." (II.187-189) Rather, he claims that he has always written with the aim of conforming to the contents of the work before him: ". . . But me conforme fully in substaunce, / Only in menyng, to conclude al on . . ." (II.190-191) He maintains that he has striven to present the true meaning as best he could, admitting, however, that he lacks ". . . þe floures of [Guido's] eloquence," (II.193) employing, once again, the "corious flour of rethoric" image, which for him seems to convey the sense of some mystical force ever present in the transmission of thought.

At the conclusion to Book V, when he has finished his task, Lydgate makes another *apologia* in which he describes the problems he has encountered in his translation, many points of which are directly associated with his source in Guido. In a more general sense, however, he now invites his readers to "correcte" but not "disdeyne" his work and to permit his ". . . ignoraunce & rudeness" to serve as his excuse. (V.3487) He admits, once more, that his metre is deficient, but seems confident that the *substaunce* will please: "For in metring þouȝ þer be ignoraunce, / ȝet in þe story ȝe may fynde pleasaunce / Touching substaunce of [þat] myn auctour wryt." (V.3491-3493) He asserts that ignorant readers have been the first to offer unfair criticism and points out that true authors like Chaucer are always kind. Indeed, he thinks that, were Chaucer alive, he would ". . . nat pinche nor gruche at euery blot . . ." (V.3522) In fact, he believes that Chaucer would have enjoyed this translation of Guido for its *substaunce* and *menyng* and would not have complained about the poor quality of its metre. Lydgate, here, is obviously defending his use of the vernacular in translation, implying, as did Dante, that it is impossible to achieve results identical with the original. Nevertheless, he welcomes emendations wherever needed, but only from those on an equal footing with Chaucer. (V.3531-3536) Apologizing, next, for his own lack of eloquence, he explains that he has tried to tell "Þe story pleyn, chefly in substaunce." (V.3543) Furthermore, he claims that his project has taught him not to trust in worldly things, because Guido's story shows that neither kings nor princes "haue ful surete" in their lives! (V.3576-3578) In a short *L'Envoye*, he observes that, since his book is ". . . enlumined with no floures / Of

rethorik, but with white and blak . . . ,” (*Lenvoye*, 100-102) he is prepared to receive criticism and will, therefore, humbly accept all well-intentioned emendations of his work:

Perefore þou most abide alle showres
Of hem þat list sette on þe a lak
(*Lenvoye*, 103-104)

As a translator, then, he has respect for the truth of his model. *Stile*, he feels, is impossible to reproduce, however, nor does he attempt to master it. On the other hand, he endorses the use of contemporary rhetorical devices, which he describes as “corious floures of rethorik,” believing them to be a primary means of perpetuating ancient works in translation, since they impart an idiomatic freshness to the material in each new age of its existence. Admitting his own deficiencies in eloquence and metre, he implies that a translator’s task is greatly increased in difficulty by attempts to reproduce the rhetorical patterns of the original. At least, he avoids this problem in *Troy Book* and, in so doing, apparently brings about much criticism of his work for his failure to observe Guido’s *stile*. The truth of the line, however, he holds inviolable, and contents himself with preserving the *sentence* and *substance* of Guido’s prose.

DANIEL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cosenza, Mario E. (tr.). *Petrarch's Letters to Classical Authors*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1910.

Ewart, Alfred. "Dante's Theory of Diction." *Modern Humanities Research Association*, XXXI (November, 1959), 15-30.

Jackson, W. W. (tr.). *Dante's Convivio*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1909.

Lydgate's Troy Book. Edited by Henry Bergen for EETS. In IV Vols. London: Kegan Paul, French, Trubner, and Company, Limited, 1906, 1908, 1910, 1935.