

Consuming the Word:  
Figures of Vernacular Translation in Late Medieval Christian Poetry

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# ABSTRACT

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More than any other period in the history of Western Europe, the Middle Ages were informed by translation. Practices of translation pervaded and underlay every aspect of medieval culture and politics. Yet, our understanding of how medieval writers thought about translation remains profoundly lacking. Most contemporary histories of translation theory choose to neglect the Middle Ages entirely, or to turn them into a footnote to Jerome's distinction between "sense-for-sense" and "word-for-word" translation. *Consuming the Word* offers a new approach to medieval translation theory by considering texts, genres, and forms that have been largely neglected by scholars. While most research in this field has concentrated on texts that are regarded as explicitly "theoretical," such as prefaces, commentaries, and treatises, *Consuming the Word* extends this investigation to the figurative language of "literary" works: poetical texts written primarily for moral and intellectual edification, aesthetic pleasure, and entertainment. By analyzing an archive of four 14th-century devotional poems composed in Spanish, Italian, and Middle English, this dissertation demonstrates that the writers of the Middle Ages articulated arguments on language, interpretation, and translation whose complexity and originality greatly surpassed the arid and derivative thinking about translation that is generally attributed to this period.

*Consuming the Word* further demonstrates that, by the late 14th century, Christian devotional writers tended to deploy a particular figure to construct arguments on translation, interpretation, and

vernacularity: the figure of gluttony. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I examine the theories of language and translation conceived by Dante Alighieri in the first decades of the 14th century. I argue that the figures of consumption and gluttony that appear in the last section of *Purgatorio* are meant to convey a theoretical justification for his use of the vernacular, bringing to fruition several contradictory arguments that are only outlined in his two previous works on the subject: *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. In the second chapter I concentrate on *Cleanness*, an anonymous and generally overlooked Middle English poem in which the poet ostensibly eulogizes the virtue of purity. By examining its figurative depictions of cooking and feasting, I contend that, rather than as a casual assortment of disparate scriptural episodes, *Cleanness* should be interpreted as a coherent argument in favor of vernacular translation. On the contrary, in the third chapter I show how a contemporary Middle English poem, the more famous *Piers Plowman*, relies on the personification of gluttony to disclose an almost antithetical argument. In *Piers Plowman*, vernacular translation is described as a losing bargain, morally and intellectually detrimental. In my fourth and final chapter, I turn to the celebrated *Libro de Buen Amor*, to analyze how its figures of eating and overeating convey an argument on the endlessness of all interpretation and on the importance of choice in the act of translating.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Consuming the Word .....	1
I. As Light as <i>Translatio</i> .....	1
II. Figurative Theory .....	7
III. A devotional Concern .....	14
IV. Gluttonous translations .....	22
“Esuriendo Sempre”: The Redemption of the Vernacular in Dante’s Cantos of Gluttony.....	29
The Cantos of Gluttony.....	32
I. The Purgation of the Vernacular.....	36
Convivio: The Bread that Enlightens .....	36
De Vulgari Eloquentia: The Light of the Vernacular .....	47
II. Of Poets and Gluttons .....	51
The Tree of the Vernacular in <i>Purgatorio</i> .....	51
The Starving Shades .....	56
III. The Theological Argument.....	60
The Cantica of Desire .....	60
The Leftovers of Vernacular Translation.....	67
Conclusion.....	71
“Gloutounes to serue”: <i>Cleanness</i> as a Defense of Vernacular Translation .....	73
I. The Sumptuous Banquet of Scripture .....	80
The Poet’s Dangerous Task .....	80
The Richest Meal .....	83
Antithetical Approaches: Cleanness and Carnalitas.....	90
II. Contrasting Cuisines.....	93
Abraham’s Spiritual Stew.....	94
The Wife’s Unorthodox Sauce.....	99
III. Belshazzar’s Gluttons .....	106
Conclusion.....	112
Glossing Glotoun: The Losses of Vernacular Translation in <i>Piers Plowman</i> .....	113
I. Translation as Necessity .....	115
The Responsibility of “Construen” .....	116
The King’s “Construen” .....	121
A Clerk’s <i>Reddere</i> .....	123
II. Translation as Loss .....	130

Will's Losing Bargains .....	131
Insurmountable Differences .....	134
III. Glossing Glotoun's Loss .....	140
The Sin of "Glosen" .....	142
Confessing the "Sins of the Tongue" .....	143
How to Return "Restitucioun" .....	149
Glosses that Give, Glosses that Rob .....	153
Glotoun's Losing "Restitucioun" .....	157
Conclusion.....	166
Don Carnal's perpetual struggle: Interpretation and Translation in the <i>Libro de Buen Amor</i> .....	169
I. <i>Confessions</i> of a Drunkard .....	175
The Figure of Wine in <i>Confessions</i> .....	176
The Figure of Wine in the <i>Libro de Buen Amor</i> .....	182
II. The Problem with Sweetness .....	193
III. Choosing One's Diet .....	203
Conclusion.....	211
Conclusion: Gluttonous Expansions.....	215
Bibliography .....	223

## INTRODUCTION: CONSUMING THE WORD

Par les livres que nos avons  
les fez des anciens savons  
et del siegle qui fui jadis.  
Ce nos ont nostre livre apris,  
qu'an Grece ot de chevalerie  
Le premier los et de clergie.  
Puis vint chevalerie a Rome  
et de la clergie la some,  
qui ore est an France venue.

Through the books that we have we know the deeds of the ancients and of the time that once was. Our books have taught us this: that Greece had the first reputation of chivalry and of clergy. Then chivalry came to Rome, and then the sum of clergy, which has now come to France.<sup>1</sup>

— Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligès*, 30-35

### I. AS LIGHT AS *TRANSLATIO*

The incipit of Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès* evokes a world entirely shaped by translation.<sup>2</sup> Almost every element that Chrétien mentions in these famous lines comes from a different time and from a different language: the stories he has told and the one that he is about to tell, his knowledge of the past, and the two institutions that govern the culture and the politics of 12<sup>th</sup>-century France—"chevalerie" and "clergie." Having travelled from East to West like the romance's eponymous hero, this knowledge and these institutions seem to acquire validity because of their foreign origin. So, "chevalerie" and "clergie" must be preserved and revered because they have sprung from the fountainheads of imperial rule—"Rome"—and classical knowledge—"Grece." Similarly, Chrétien insists that one should believe the story of *Cligès* because it was written in an ancient book, passed on

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<sup>1</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligès* (Paris: H. Champion, 2006), 62. My translation.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to how translation is treated in *Cligès*, see Michelle Freeman, *The Poetics of Translation Studii and Conjointure: Chretien De Troyes's Cliges* (Lexington, Ky.: French Forum Pub, 1979) and Levilson C. Reis, "Clergie, Clerkly Studium, and the Medieval Literary History of Chrétien De Troyes's Romances," *The Modern Language Review* 106, no. 3 (2011): 682–96.

from one place and time to another: “Li livres est molt anciens | qui tesmoingne l’estoire a voire; | por ce fete ele mialz a croire” (27-29). Chrétien implies that those texts that have been inherited, transmitted, translated from the languages of the past should be considered more authoritative; that translation should be regarded as a mark of truthfulness.

The first few lines of *Cligès* are often cited as a memorable condensation of what medieval historiography meant by *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii*:<sup>3</sup> the parallel transmissions of classical learning—“clergie”—and imperial power—“chivalrie”—from the places and languages of antiquity to those of present-day scholars and rulers. The noun *translatio* mainly denoted a concrete spatial transfer in classical Latin; yet, as Chrétien himself suggests by highlighting his own adaptation of *Cligès*, this geographical shift came to be identified with a linguistic one over the course of the Middle Ages, when translation became fundamental. The millennium that elapsed between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the publication of Antonio de Nebrija’s *Gramática de la lengua castellana*—the first grammar of a modern European language to appear in print—witnessed an exceptional linguistic turnabout, whose scope and lasting impact have remained without parallels in the history of the West: the rise and the establishment of the European vernaculars as languages of power and prestige.<sup>4</sup> As it changed and expanded over time, the diverse linguistic landscape of the European Middle Ages made translation indispensable for the consolidation of the burgeoning nation states and the dissemination of Christianity.

Thus, the incipit of *Cligès* also demonstrates how translation served to sanction the progressive displacement of the former languages of authority.<sup>5</sup> By translating and adapting

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of how *Cligès* treats these two notions, see Sharon Kinoshita, “Chrétien de Troyes’s ‘Cligés’ in the Medieval Mediterranean,” *Arthuriana* 18, no. 3 (2008): 48–61 and Douglas Kelly, “Honor, Debate, and ‘Translatio Imperii’ in ‘Cligés,’” *Arthuriana* 18, no. 3 (2008): 33–47.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent introduction to the field of medieval translation, see Jeanette Beer’s introduction to *A Companion to Medieval Translation* (Arc Humanities Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> This function of medieval translation is proposed in Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

preexisting texts, the writers of medieval Europe would prove that the modern vernaculars could be deployed in those domains of art, knowledge, and government that had been previously regarded as the exclusive domains of Latin. At the same time, every major philosophical and scientific upheaval that took place during these centuries rested on the work of translators: from the many treatises on optics, astronomy, and medicine translated by the so-called “School of Toledo,”<sup>6</sup> to the explosive spread of Aristotelianism through the translation of Averroes’s commentaries, to the biblical translations that paved the way for the religious dissent that would culminate in the Reformation.

Nevertheless, for all the importance that he seems to attribute to translation, Chrétien does not endow these solemn transfers of power and learning with any gravity in these lines. Rather, his memorable account of *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii* is characterized by a surprising lightness—almost a kind of levity. Translation happens almost spontaneously in the opening section of *Cligès*. The values of chivalry and clerical teaching—which serve as anachronistic metonyms for “*imperium*” and “*studium*”—leap from one place to another like the dynamic heroes of a romance—wonderfully swift and invulnerable. Over the span of four lines, Chrétien repeats the rhyming nouns “chevalerie” and “clergie” in the same order and approximately in the same position; even though their owners and settings may have changed, these concepts and their referents remain untarnished—exactly the same in their moves from Greece, to Rome, to France. Furthermore, these lines deliberately conceal the presence of any mediators or translators in these exchanges. “Chevalerie” and “clergie” are personified so that no particular agent may be held responsible for the slow and gradual process of rendering them into a different language and culture; rather, turned into the grammatical subjects of the verbs “vint” and “est [...] venue,” they seem to move at their own pace and without encountering any resistance. Light and seemingly spontaneous, medieval translation—and the *translatio studii et*

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<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to the “School of Toledo,” see Jane S. Gerber, “Crossing the Borders of Art and Society,” in *Cities of Splendour in the Shaping of Sephardi History* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 48–85.

*imperii* that it enabled—ostensibly unfolded like a breezy transfer of values and concepts from one time and place to another.

All in all, Chrétien’s brisk octosyllabic couplets well encapsulate the current consensus on medieval translation: a practice that governed the writing and the thinking of the period, even though most writers and thinkers ostensibly shrunk from considering it with gravity. For all its importance and exceptionality, medieval translation is—when not neglected—generally treated with a sort of theoretical lightness by contemporary scholars. This lightness rests on a widespread conviction: that in the Middle Ages translation was constantly practiced yet hardly ever theorized. Albeit ubiquitous and indispensable, translation seemed to remain—for the most part—an unspoken and careless enterprise. In other words, the multitude of strikingly original approaches to translation that have been transmitted to us from this period—and that make up a vast portion of medieval writing—did not manage to coalesce into an equally inventive discourse around translation. Thus, albeit foundational, medieval translation comes across as somewhat groundless: an extensive and impactful body of writing that sprouted as if on its own, leaving behind only the faintest methodological impressions. For instance, in a recent account of medieval translation theory that appeared on the pages of *Medieval Translator*—a journal entirely devoted to the study of translation during the European Middle Ages—Brenda Hosington, a specialist in this field, remarks that the theoretical texts that belong to this period generally “conform to the tradition of being disappointingly free of any critical comment.”<sup>7</sup> She writes that the prefaces and glosses that accompany the fifteenth- and fourteenth-century translations that comprise her archive do not live up to the originality and inventiveness of the translations themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> Brenda M. Hosington, “Henry Watson, Apprentyse of London and Translatoure of Romance and Satire,” in *The Medieval Translator. Traduire Au Moyen Age*, vol. 10 (Brepols Publishers, 2007), 8.

Hosington describes a rift between theory and practice that has been observed by many other scholars of medieval translation.<sup>8</sup> In practice, medieval translations strike us as endlessly inventive, fluid, unbound; they are characterized by constant experimentation and by an unparalleled variety of methods, approaches, and purposes. On the contrary, the theories of translation developed during this period seem for the most part arid and derivative.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, most contemporary histories of translation theory turn the European Middle Ages into a footnote to Jerome's classic dictum: the now-familiar injunction to translate "sense for sense" instead of "word for word." Hosington herself complains that the critical apparatuses which she discusses are filled with "clichéd" allusions to Jerome's dictum. This maxim looms over all discussions of medieval translation theory, as if it had travelled through the Middle Ages with the same lightness that Chrétien ascribes to the institutions of *Cligès*—cutting through centuries of painstaking practice. As Nicholas Watson puts it, the distinction between "'word-for-word' and 'sense-for-sense' translation" has by now come to be equated with the entirety of what we call "medieval translation theory."<sup>10</sup>

This identification may seem hardly surprising. There is something familiar and current, almost commonplace, about the centuries-old formula that Jerome used to describe and defend his own approach to translation: "Non uerbum e uerbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu." One does not need to have encountered this statement in the famous "Letter to Pammachius" to recognize the

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this perceived rift between theory and practice, see Alessandra Petrina, "Introduction," in *The Medieval Translator. Traduire Au Moyen Age* (Brepols Publishers, 2013), 1–9 and Rita Copeland, "The Fortunes of 'Non Verbum pro Verbo': Or, Why Jerome Is Not a Ciceronian," in *The Medieval Translator. The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989), 15–35. Copeland argues that the practice of medieval translation has developed in a sort of theoretical and disciplinary vacuum. Medieval translators appropriated the terminology of classical antiquity but applied it to a vastly different set of practices. So, Jerome's "verbum" and "sensus," derived from Cicero's distinction between "interpres" and "orator," hardly reflects the displacement of authority that, according to Copeland, vernacular translation strived to achieve in practice.

<sup>9</sup> This idea dominates the accounts of medieval translation theory that we find, for instance, in Carmen Millán and Francesca Bartrina, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies*, Routledge Handbooks in Applied Linguistics (Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) and Mona Baker, ed., *Critical Readings in Translation Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Watson, "Theories of Translation," in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, ed. Roger Ellis, Stuart Gillespie, and David Hopkins (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 73.

dichotomy between “word-for-word” and “sense-for-sense.” Adapted from the writings of Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian, this contrast still dictates, to a large extent, how translations are read, written, and taught in the West. Because of its currency in present-day discussions of translation, we tend to assume that Jerome’s formula has largely gone unchallenged during the centuries that separate us from its articulation. Indeed, most histories of translation theory treat Jerome’s statement as the foundation of all the thinking about this practice that Europe produced over and beyond the span of a millennium. In the famous survey of this discipline that George Steiner sketched in *After Babel*, the distinction between “word-for-word” and “sense-for-sense” is treated as the only consequential theory of translation formulated in the West from antiquity to the 19th century.<sup>11</sup> For Steiner, hardly anything impactful was written about translation between the time of Jerome and that of Hölderlin. More recently, the influential theorist of translation Peter Newmark has proposed a periodization of the discipline according to which Jerome’s defense of “sense-for-sense” dominated the field until at least the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> A similar chronology was proposed by Hosington in her aforementioned piece: She suggested that Cicero and Jerome’s “old binary concept” prevailed until the 1960s, when it was eventually made “a little more complex” thanks to the work of Eugene Nida.<sup>13</sup> Most contemporary histories of western translation theory conform to these examples: They highlight the towering influence of Jerome’s approach and belittle the impact of any other theoretical text on the subject written before modernity. Of all the periods subsequent to Jerome’s “Letter” that have been overshadowed by his pioneering contribution, none seems as systematically neglected as the European Middle Ages. Steiner’s account of translation theory in *After Babel* mentions a single medieval writer: the humanist Leonardo Bruni. Similarly, according to Newark’s chronology, nothing

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<sup>11</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 236.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Newmark, “The Linguistic and Communicative Stages in Translation Theory,” in *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. Jeremy Munday (Routledge, 2009), 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> Hosington, “Henry Watson,” 8.

of substance occurred in translation theory between the formulation of Jerome’s “sense-for-sense” and the advent of “the Renaissance.”

## II. FIGURATIVE THEORY

My dissertation challenges the contemporary consensus on the lightness of “medieval translation theory” by demonstrating how the writers of the European Middle Ages did in fact articulate theories of translation whose complexity and originality greatly surpassed the boundaries of Jerome’s “sensus” and “verbum.” Throughout this dissertation I deploy the term “translation” to refer to a broad array of different yet related practices, which include intralingual translation, redaction, and glossing. Because of its cultural and intellectual centrality, medieval translation became inextricable from hermeneutics: For late medieval writers, thinking about interpretation became synonymous with thinking about translation. The arguments developed by the four authors which I have considered in my investigation confirm this interrelatedness. The works that I will examine in the next four chapters developed rich and novel ways to think about translation, which contemplated the affective connotations of different languages, the inevitable ethical implications and hermeneutic choices involved in translation, and the questions of linguistic specificity and untranslatability; thoughtful and inventive arguments that anticipate positions maintained by thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, or Lawrence Venuti.<sup>14</sup> These arguments are calling for our critical attention because they challenge assumptions that have shaped western translation for centuries, and that persist in our shared understanding of what translation ought to accomplish. The memorable dichotomy that underpinned Jerome’s formula—“sensus” against “verbum”—lives on; from the

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<sup>14</sup> I am alluding to Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” trans. Steven Rendall, *TTR* 10, no. 2 (1997): 151–65; Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” in *Difference in Translation*, trans. Joseph Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–207; Lawrence Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013). The potential overlaps between these approaches and those of medieval literary theory are discussed by Michelle R. Warren, “Modern Theoretical Approaches to Medieval Translation,” in *A Companion to Medieval Translation*, ed. Jeanette Beer (Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2018), 165–74.

early Middle Ages to the present day, translation has largely been understood, taught, and practiced in terms of “word” vs. “sense,” “literal” vs. “free,” “formal equivalence” vs. “dynamic equivalence.”<sup>15</sup>

This dichotomy rests on two pervasive ideas that still inform our understanding of how translation unfolds. First, as Lawrence Venuti has explained, the formula of “sensus” and “verbum” implies that the source text and the target text can share an “unchangeable essence”: a kernel of meaning or a stylistic quality that can be carried, unaltered, into and through a different language.<sup>16</sup> For Jerome, this “unchangeable essence” can coincide with either the “sensus” or the “verbum” of the source. Even though he would generally abide by the criterion of “sense-for-sense,” Jerome chose to resort to the “word-for-word” method for those texts—particularly Scripture—whose formal features conveyed a “mysterium”: an enigmatic, somewhat mystical, meaning or effect. Whole and unaltered, albeit not fully understood, this “mysterium” would be transferred into the target language together with the “uerborum ordo” within which it inhered. One might have replaced every word of a text while rendering it into a different language; still, its meaning and the mystery of its syntax could have remained the same. Thus, whether he chose to render “word for word” or “sense by sense,” Jerome contended that the substance of the original text could be preserved even while changing everything else. This corollary about the immutability of the “unchangeable essence” led to a second pervasive idea: that of a separation between forms and contents. When he spoke of maintaining the “sensus” of a text, Jerome implied that this core meaning could exist independently of any “verbum.” Thus, this model assumed that a translator might radically alter the form of a text without affecting its content in any meaningful way.

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, the introduction to Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2014), where the author examines how “the distinction between word for word and sense for sense translation, established within the Roman system, has continued to be a point for debate in one way or another right up to the present.”

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Venuti, “Genealogies of Translation Theory: Jerome,” *Boundary 2* 37, no. 3 (August 1, 2010): 5–28.

Certainly, Jerome’s “sensus” and “verbum” dominated much of the writing about translation that was produced in the Western Middle Ages, together with the assumption that the meaning, intention, and effect of a text could exist independently of the particular linguistic forms used to convey them. This assumption was corroborated by the Aristotelian theories of language that Boethius—and, later, Thomas Aquinas—expounded in their popular commentaries to *De Interpretatione*—one of the first books of the *Organon* to become part of a university curriculum. Here Aristotle famously claimed that all languages convey the same “passiones animae” (‘passions of the soul’), even though the “notae” (‘signs’) used to express them may differ. This idea lingered on; even when the precise interpretation of Aristotle’s “passiones” and “notae” came under scrutiny, medieval thinkers generally held on to the notion that the difference between one language and another concerned only signs—not meanings. In the late 13th century, for instance, Roger Bacon relied on the authority of Boethius’ gloss to confirm that

eundem intellectum habet Graecus de re, quam habet Latinus, et tamen  
diversas voces proferunt ad rem intellectam designandam.

a Greek speaker has the same concept of a thing as a Latin speaker, and  
nonetheless they produce different sounds to designate it.<sup>17</sup>

Although elsewhere he acknowledged the difficulties and errors involved in all translations, Bacon’s theoretical approach aligned with Jerome’s: He maintained that one “intellectum”—a fixed substance—could be signified by “diversas voces”—mutable and manifold linguistic forms. Around the same time, Thomas Aquinas similarly argued that “eandem fidei veritatem aliis verbis Latini confitentur et Graeci” (‘with different words, Latins and Greeks profess the same truth of faith’), and that, as a consequence,

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<sup>17</sup> K. M. Fredborg, Lauge Nielsen, and Jan Pinborg, “An Unedited Part of Roger Bacon’s ‘Opus Maius’: ‘De Signis,’” *Traditio* 34 (1978): 75–136. My translation.

ad officium boni translatoris pertinet ut ea quae sunt Catholicae fidei transferens, servet sententiam, mutet autem modum loquendi secundum proprietatem linguae in quam transfert.

while translating those things that belong to the Catholic Faith, it behooves a good translator to preserve the meaning, but also to change the way of speaking according to the peculiarity of the language into which one translates.<sup>18</sup>

Thomas openly embraced Jerome's method; because two languages could convey "eandem [...] veritatem" through different "verbis," a translator's "officium" entailed a twofold and almost contradictory obligation: to preserve the "sententiam" while changing the "modum loquendi." Versions of this dichotomy appeared in most theoretical and prefatory texts on the subject: among others, in the theological writings of Gregory the Great, Augustine, and Anselm of Canterbury; in prefaces written by Burgundio of Pisa, Jean de Meun, and Richard Rolle; in the prologues to King Alfred's *Consolation of Philosophy* and to the Wycliffite Bible.<sup>19</sup>

These prefaces, commentaries, and treatises abound with assertions that replicate this same distinction between "sensus" and "verbum." It should come as no surprise, therefore, that contemporary scholarship in this field has ultimately reduced all medieval theories about translation to this single contrast. The burgeoning scholarship in "medieval literary theory" and, to a lesser extent, "medieval translation theory" that has risen to prominence during the past few decades has centered on editions, anthologies, and expositions of texts deemed "theoretical"—where "theory," as Nicholas Watson reminds us, is used as a conscious anachronism.<sup>20</sup> Ushered in by the seminal history of *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism* assembled by Alastair Minnis,<sup>21</sup> work on this fruitful archive of

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Errores Graecorum: Liber Contra Errores Graecorum Ad Preces Papae Urbani Editus*, ed. Centre Traditio Litterarum Occidentalium (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013). My paraphrase.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Robinson, ed., *Western Translation Theory: From Herodotus to Nietzsche*, 2nd ed (Manchester, UK; Northampton, MA: St. Jerome Pub, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Watson, "Theories of Translation," 73.

<sup>21</sup> A. J. Minnis, A. Brian Scott, and David Wallace, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100-c. 1375: The Commentary-Tradition* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1988).

primary sources has continued with the rich collections of vernacular prologues edited by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Walter Haug, and with the imposing anthology of Latin *artes* assembled by Rita Copeland.<sup>22</sup> Heterogeneous as they may seem, these undertakings share a core assumption: that most of the thinking about writing, reading, and translation that took place in the Western Middle Ages is recorded in archives that we can roughly characterize as either paratextual—in the case of prologues and commentaries—or pedagogical—in the case of the *artes* and the academic *summae*. These texts provide us with substantial insight into the intellectual history of this period, reflecting—and at times anticipating—major changes in how medieval readers and writers conceived notions of authorship and cultural authority. Nevertheless, I contend that the understanding of “medieval translation theory” that we can gain from these sources remains skewed and profoundly lacking.

My dissertation proves that we can gain a fuller understanding of the theories of translation elaborated in the European Middle Ages if we turn our attention to a different set of genres and a different set of forms. In particular, I propose that we extend our search to those genres that we would call “literary” rather than “theoretical”: works that rely less on plain argumentation and more on the tropes of poetry; works that combine the search for moral and intellectual edification with that for aesthetic pleasure, affective response, and entertainment; works intended for a broader audience of readers and listeners; works that belong more to the domain of a flourishing vernacular culture than to that of an elite Latin literacy. I contend that some of these “literary” texts were meant to convey theories of literature, language, and translation. Yet, the forms through which these theories were conveyed did not correspond to the explicit, analytical, argumentative prose that we

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Ian R. Johnson, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Thelma S. Fenster, and Delbert W. Russell, eds., *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England: Texts and Translations, c.1120-c.1450* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY, USA: D.S. Brewer, 2016); Elizabeth Dearnley, *Translators and Their Prologues in Medieval England*, Bristol Studies in Medieval Cultures (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016); Walter Haug, *Vernacular Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: The German Tradition, 800-1300, in Its European Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

tend to associate with theory today. Rather, the writers who developed these alternative theories of translation resorted to formal means that I call “figures.”

To some extent, I have settled on the term “figure” to emphasize the role that figurative language *qua* figurative should play in present and future investigations in this field. Contrary to most contemporary expectations concerning the boundaries, functions, and methods of “theoretical” discourses, I believe that the writers of the European Middle Ages could and did deploy figurative language to articulate theory—or, to put it more explicitly, to express and elaborate on general principles concerning their compositional and hermeneutic practices. In an insightful and provocative response to the assumptions that underlie *The Idea of the Vernacular*, one of the anthologies that have launched the aforementioned contemporary trend in “medieval literary theory,” Nicolette Zeeman has persuasively claimed that

the full extent of literary self-theorization—whether Latin or vernacular—only becomes apparent when we recognize that much of it is expressed in figured and even metaphorical form.<sup>23</sup>

Following this insight, her cogent case for the analysis of what she calls “imaginative literary theory” contrasts the “analytical, preceptive, and explicit language” of pedagogical texts—the prefaces, commentaries, and handbooks that have recently elicited great scholarly attention—with the imagery that poets deployed to represent, develop, and often reject what was taught in schools. She argues that our investigation of medieval literary theory should involve the latter as well as the former; for instance, she suggests that we may better understand how Chaucer and Langland understood the rhetorical concept of *inventio* by considering how they deployed the trope of the *chanson d'aventure* in their incipits. From this standpoint, my approach to medieval translation theory derives from an

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<sup>23</sup> Nicolette Zeeman, “Imaginative Theory,” in *Middle English*, by Nicolette Zeeman, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford University Press, 2007), 222.

analogous dissatisfaction with a “critical prioritization of the explicit”:<sup>24</sup> I maintain that we will do justice to the theories of translation elaborated in the European Middle Ages only when we turn our attention to the arguments that have been conveyed and developed through figurative language.

However, while Zeeman seems reluctant to define a specific object for this “imaginative” inquiry into the medieval theories of language and literature, I propose that our search for these arguments should be directed towards a particular kind of formal device. With the term “figure,” therefore, I designate the descriptions of single events or recurrent behaviors whose context and allusive details suggest that they should and could be interpreted figuratively; in particular, that their methods, effects, and implications should be abstracted and transposed to the domain of hermeneutic and compositional practices. I call this device “figure” to underline its proximity to the “figura” famously defined by Erich Auerbach in the eponymous essay.<sup>25</sup> Auerbach treats “figura” as a distinctive rhetorical device of the European Middle Ages, mainly used to establish a relationship between two historical events; so, for instance, Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of his son Isaac serves as a “figura” of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Auerbach highlights that, while the latter event serves as a “fulfillment” of the former, neither event is supposed to be regarded as less historically true than the other. Unlike metaphor and allegory, “figura” does not entail a replacement. Therefore, the literal meaning of a “figure” such as Beatrice in the *Commedia* is not diminished or discarded as fictive when its figurative meaning—theology—is revealed; rather, it maintains its historicity. Similarly, the figures that I will analyze in the following chapters serve as theories of translation in that they reflect functions, processes, and implications that the author implicitly attributes to translation; but they never cease to serve as self-standing, literal descriptions of episodes and behaviors. Translation becomes a new referent for the figures that I analyze; but it does not replace the preexisting one.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Paolo Valesio, NED-New edition, vol. 9 (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 9–76.

Figures push us to investigate relationships of likeness: They do not entail a substitution, only a juxtaposition.

### III. A DEVOTIONAL CONCERN

To clarify what I mean by “figure,” I will consider an example taken from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*—a work that abounds in figurative theory. Halfway through the pilgrimage to Canterbury that lends the work its title and narrative frame, one of the travelers prefaces his tale with a surprisingly vivid tirade against the sin of gluttony. The digression seems extravagant and hardly justified, particularly since the speaker—an odiously wicked pardoner—has opened his monologue with a warning against a different sin, that of greed. Even more unexpectedly, the Pardoner’s lecture on the evils of gluttony turns into an attack against cooks. These are censured for their newfangled culinary practices, with which they prepare elaborate delicacies that pander to the immoderate appetites of the gluttons.

Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,  
And turnen substaunce into accident  
To fulfille al thy likerous talent!  
Out of the harde bones knocke they  
The mary, for they caste noght away  
That may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote.  
Of spicerie of leef, and bark, and roote  
Shal been his sauce ymaked by delit,  
To make hym yet a newer appetit.  
But, certes, he that haunteth swiche delices  
Is deed, whil that he lyveth in tho vices.

These cooks, how they mash, and strain, and grind, | And turn substance into  
accident | To fulfill all your lecherous desire! | Out of the hard bones they  
knock | The marrow, for they throw nothing away | That may go through  
the gullet soft and sweet. | Of seasoning of leaves, and bark, and roots, |  
Their sauce shall be made with delight, | To make them still a newer appetite.

| But, certainly, he who seeks such delicacies | Is dead, while he lives in those vices. (538-48)<sup>26</sup>

Nothing prevents one from interpreting this description literally. Cooks did turn the strangest ingredients into appetizing sauces, and the Pardoner's fixation with the sin of gluttony—while it might come across as exaggerated—was based on doctrinal tenets. Gluttony was indeed regarded as a mortal sin, and the search for particularly exquisite delicacies—such as this marrow sauce seasoned with herbs—was regarded as one of its symptoms.<sup>27</sup> Yet, this literal description of immoral sauce-making can also serve as a figure for a literary argument—a piece of literary theory. The cooks' actions—the verbs that designate their culinary practices—evoke the methods followed by those translators who abide by Jerome's precepts: “Out of the harde” shell of Jerome's “verbum” they aspire to “knokke” the “softe and swoote” content of the “sensus.” Their intense work—“stampe, and streyne, and grynde”—is based on the assumption that content can be served and ingested—“go thurgh the golet”—without any regard for the form that originally conveyed it. Like the most domesticating of translators, the cooks seek to make the substance that they offer as appetizing as possible, removing all that may come across as “harde” and pursuing only the “likerous talent” and the “delit” of their patrons. Nevertheless, the Pardoner adds, the changes that they make ultimately alter the essence of what they dish out; so, ingredients as diverse and as potentially off-putting as “leef, and bark, and roote” are all reduced to a simple “sauce.” The core of the figure, and the admonishment that might most easily be transferred from the domain of cooking to that of translating, consists in the accusation of “turnen substaunce into accident.” With this Aristotelian phrase, the Pardoner asserts that the “accident” matters; that the “bones” around the “mary” cannot

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<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson, 3rd ed (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> For an introduction to the sin of gluttony, see Morton Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins; An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept* (Michigan State College Press, 1967); Carole Straw, “Gregory, Cassian, and the Cardinal Vices,” in *In the Garden of Evil. The Vices and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Newhauser (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005).

be replaced or discarded—in the same way that the style, genre, and language of a text should be regarded as more than sheer vessels. Readers might find the soft, tasty insides appetizing, but they should not neglect the hard, diverse form that contain them.

If one reads it as a figure, the Pardoner's harangue against culinary transformation becomes a piece of literary theory placed within the body of the *Canterbury Tales*. Indeed, its very placement within the work indicates that this passage could serve a specific argumentative function. In most manuscripts that preserve the whole collection, the Pardoner's tale appears right before the heterogeneous seventh fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*: a section which comprises a series of widely different formal experiments that range from earnest, straightforward prose—"The Tale of Melibee"—to janky, lighthearted doggerel—"The Tale of Sir Thopas." Before entering this section, the Pardoner's prologue would direct the attention of readers towards the question of form—of the "accident" that carries the "substance" of a tale—and propose that form itself plays a fundamental role; that its being "harde" or "softe" matters a great deal to what the tale strives to achieve. Furthermore, the Pardoner's moral indignation at the "vices" encouraged by these cooks suggests that the hardness of a particular formal choice—the difficulty or unpleasantness that a particular genre or style creates for the reader—might ultimately prove morally beneficial; in other words, that a reader might gain something more from consuming a "harde" tale. All in all, this figure anticipates how the audience might approach what follows—expecting to find true edification in the difficult prose of "The Tale of Melibee" and little virtue in the silly rhymes of "The Tale of Sir Thopas." Finally, it should be noted that this figure does not work as a metaphor or as an allegory. Readers are not supposed to dismiss the Pardoner's fixation with food and gluttony, and his suspiciously informed denunciation of *haute cuisine*, as purely figurative. Rather, the behaviors that the passage describes are meant to reflect and comment upon the choices made by the poet, constructing a fragment of the literary theory that the *Canterbury Tales* aspires to put forward.

Indeed, I sense that Chaucer attributes this particular figure to the Pardoner—a figure of translation that bespeaks the character’s fixation with gluttony and food—because by the late 14<sup>th</sup> century these figures had become a recognizable staple of homiletic and devotional writing. As a preacher, the Pardoner feels comfortable with figures that equate consumption with reading, food with Scripture, cooking with translating or interpreting. For instance, one of the quintessential examples of *figura* that Auerbach cites at the end of his essay belongs to the devotional poet Gonzalo de Berceo, who in his early poem *El Sacrificio de la Misa* juxtaposes the Jewish celebration of Passover with the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist—itsself a *figura* for Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.<sup>28</sup> Yet, in the poem itself, this grand overarching *figura* multiplies into a series of smaller figures, some of which liken the experience of reading the poem to the consumption of a fulfilling meal.

Si en sabor vos cae esta nuestra leyenda,  
 habetla por yantar, esperat la merienda:  
 agora entraremos en la firme facienda,  
 do nos ha menester de bien tener la rienda.

Agora va el preste al meollo llegando,  
 los días van creciendo, el sol escalentando;  
 cuanto más lo comido más me vo espantando:  
 ¡sáquenos Dios a puerto, sea de nuestro bando!

If you are finding this narration of ours flavorful, | take it as breakfast, [and]  
 wait for the lunch: | now we will enter into the real business, | where we  
 must hold the rein of [what is] good. | Now the priest goes to approach the  
 core, | the hours are growing, the sun is heating up; | the more I have eaten  
 the more I get scared: | may God bring us ashore, may he be on our side!<sup>29</sup>

This figure accords with its context because the poem itself is based on figures of consumption that Christian worshippers would have found familiar: the typological connection between the Paschal Lamb and the Last Supper, the liturgical juxtaposition of the reading of Scripture with the

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<sup>28</sup> The deployment of “figura” in Gonzalo’s poem has been examined by Alan Deyermond, “La Estructura Tipológica Del Sacrificio de La Misa,” *Berceo*, no. 94 (1978): 97–104.

<sup>29</sup> Gonzalo de Berceo, *El Sacrificio de La Misa; La Vida de Santa Oria; El Martirio de San Lorenzo*, ed. Brian Dutton, Colección Támesis. Serie A, Monografías 80 (London: Támesis Books, 1981), 84. My translation.

consumption of the consecrated host, and the sacrament of the Eucharist itself—a reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice that becomes a miraculous participation in it. The Christian writings of the Middle Ages abound with figures of consumption because a *figura* of consumption served as one of the fundamental tenets of Christian theology. Moreover, the Gospels and the writings of the Church fathers were mined for figures that turned literates into eaters, feeders, and cooks, thus directing the reader’s attention towards their historical physicality, their carnal appetites, and their concrete needs.

From this shared corpus of Christian theology, the homiletic and devotional writers of the western Middle Ages developed their own distinctive figures of consumption, some of which became figures of translation. One of these widely influential figures corresponded to the monastic practice of *ruminatio*, discussed by Mary Carruthers in relation to the common mnemonic metaphor of “eating the book.”<sup>30</sup> According to Carruthers, *ruminatio* was meant to be “quite literally intended” as “an image of regurgitation”; like cud, endlessly chewed by ruminants, the words memorized by monks were pushed back from their chest, where they had been stored on a previous occasion, to the mouth, where they were quietly but incessantly repeated. The deverbal noun which designated this activity, *ruminatio*, did not foreground the mental processes underlying its execution, but only the concrete physical motions involved in it:<sup>31</sup> the flow of speech from the organ of storage to that of articulation; the monotonous work of tongue, lips, and teeth; and even the production of original ideas and sentences, released during the mastication of familiar passages. As a matter of fact, this latter occurrence was explicitly linked to the gases and refluxes issued during digestion, as attested in a twelfth-century *Regola monachorum* quoted by Carruthers.

Ad orationem nocte consurgenti non indigestio cibi ructum faciat, sed  
inanitas. Nam quidam vir inter pastores eximius: sicut fumus, inquit, fugat  
apes, sic indigesta ructatio avertit Spiritus sancti charismata. Ructus autem

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 165-167.

<sup>31</sup> Philip J. West, “Rumination in Bede’s Account of Caedmon,” *Monastic Studies*, no. 12 (1976): 217–226.

dicitur proprie digestio cibi, et concoctarum escarum in ventum efflatio. Quomodo ergo juxta qualitatem ciborum de stomacho ructus erumpit, et vel boni, vel mali odoris flatus indicium est, ita interioris hominis cogitationes verba proferunt, et *ex abundantia cordis os loquitur* (Luc. VI, 43). Justus comedens replet animam suam. Cumque sacris doctrinis fuerit satiatus, de boni cordis thesauro profert ea quae bona sunt.

The belching of the person who rises for nightly prayer should not be provoked by indigestion, but by emptiness. Indeed, [as] that famous pastor said: as smoke drives bees away, so eructation caused by indigestion turns away the gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, a belch is properly defined as the digestion of food, and as the blowing of digested food into wind. Therefore, in the same way that a belch causes the quality of foods to burst forth from the stomach, and the blowing of a smell, either good or bad, serves as [its] indication, so words bring out the thoughts of the inner person, and *the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart*. A righteous person who is eating fills up one's soul. And when one is satiated with sacred doctrines, one brings out those things which are good from the storehouse of the good heart.<sup>32</sup>

Irreverent as it may seem, the belching of devotees caused not wry disapprobation, but an earnest reflection concerning the process of devotional composition, derived—or, rather, emanated—from the assimilation of Scripture. Thus, the monastic figure of *ruminatio* emphasized how the reception, adaptation, and production of texts—even of those which contained spiritually edifying teachings—proceeded from concrete circumstances.

This imbrication of spiritual and concrete factors distinguishes the figures of consumption that medieval writers deployed in these religious contexts. Certainly, since memorization and study were regarded as physical activities, physical factors could determine the composition of texts derived from the interpretation of Scripture. For the writer of *Regula monachorum*, this process took the form of a strictly physiological happening, almost hydraulic in its essence: an inevitable outburst of “verba,” triggered by the filling up of one’s “thesaurus.” However, even when they seemed to adopt a decidedly more spiritual stance, the figures of consumption that were used to depict devotional

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<sup>32</sup> Pseudo-Jerome, *Regula Monachorum*, PL, XXX, 354 B, in J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina: The Full Text Database* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 1996). My translation.

composition manifested a similar attentiveness to its material circumstances. While elaborating on the idea that “[c]omposition is also spoken of as *ruminatio*,” Carruthers cites the example of Cædmon’s miraculous song, allegedly one of the first texts composed in an English vernacular, as narrated in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*.<sup>33</sup> According to Bede, the herder Cædmon was guarding his lord’s “stabula iumentorum” (‘stables for draught cattle’) when he learned how to “conuert[ere]” (‘turn’ or ‘translate’) passages of Scripture or doctrine “in carmen dulcissimum” (‘into the sweetest kind of song’), “quasi mundum animal ruminando,” (‘ruminating just as if he had been a clean animal’). Although Bede narrates that Cædmon received this gift from a divine apparition, his exposition of the prodigy mostly focuses on the earthly origin of the herder’s vocation, akin to the belching of the *Regula monachorum*: his job, his mundane tasks, his humble surroundings, and the correspondence between his poetic technique and the rumination of cattle, which he could have observed in the livestock around him. As the consequence of a miracle and as the imitation of a beastly habit, Cædmon’s *ruminatio* served to “conuert[ere]” the Word of God into the vernacular of his everyday existence. Thus, to illustrate the first example of vernacular translation ever recorded in the history of the English language, Bede relies on a figure of consumption that he has inherited from the monastic tradition.

As these examples show, the religious writers of the western Middle Ages tended to associate writing and reading with a particular set of figures, through which they customarily reflected upon diverse processes of composition, interpretation, and translation. My dissertation shows how these figures of consumption grow into complex theoretical means in the late Middle Ages, when translation itself became a devotional issue. Throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the political influence and financial of dominion of the clergy and the papacy were repeatedly weakened; movements and

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<sup>33</sup> Hist. Ecc. IV.24, in Michael Lapidge, ed., *Storia Degli Inglesi. Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Mondadori, 2010).

doctrines deemed heretical resurged; the persecution of heterodoxy exacerbated.<sup>34</sup> In this context, vernacular translation enabled Western Christianity to sustain itself while its institutional center was losing unity, authority, and power. The decentralized consumption of the formerly monolithic Scriptural text reflected the decentralization of the formerly unified religious institution: a crumbled Word for a crumbling Church.

The deployment of vernacular translations presupposed that a Christian could be enlightened by consuming the crumbs of Scripture; from its banquet one could draw and adapt a fragment that would cater to a specific audience, moment, and purpose. The translated text—not the minister—would now serve as an interpreter and as a mediator, introduced between the atemporal words of Scripture and the present tense of its consumers. For this reason, vernacular translation was often—and understandably—regarded as a threat to ministerial authority and as an instrument of heretical thought. Translating the Bible was openly condemned only occasionally—notably in England, through Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409.<sup>35</sup> However, since it always entailed a shift from the unity and immutability of Latin towards the plurality and changeability of the European vernaculars, the process of interpreting and adapting Scripture within these new languages remained suspiciously and uncomfortably close to the transgression of heterodoxy. Albeit vital to the forms of predication and religiosity that flourished in this age, vernacular translation was constantly placed under scrutiny. How could Scripture remain one and the same, when its words were being altered and adapted to benefit a plurality of particular contexts? How could it be deemed eternal, when the languages through which it was consumed would palpably change over time?

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<sup>34</sup> For a survey of the history of the Christian Church in the late Middle Ages, see R. N. Swanson, ed., *The Routledge History of Medieval Christianity: 1050-1500*, The Routledge Histories (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> This ambivalent attitude towards biblical translation is discussed in Frans Van Lieere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

I argue that, in reaction to these questions, the writers who translated, interpreted, and adapted the Bible justified their choices through arguments that they embedded in their works—theories of vernacular translation. Accordingly, my dissertation examines four major examples of late medieval devotional poetry to demonstrate how the Christian writers of 14th-century Western Europe turned to figurative language to construct their theories of vernacular translation. My main archive consists of four poems composed in different parts of Europe during the 14th century: Dante's *Purgatorio*, the anonymous *Cleanness*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and Juan Ruiz's *Libro de Buen Amor*. Apart from elaborating unique theories of translation, these texts share at least three features: they are written in verse; they contain explicit instances of vernacular translation; they concern questions of Christian spirituality and devotion. This latter aspect may warrant them the denomination of “devotional,” even though they display different ways of belonging to this loose category: *Purgatorio* and *Piers Plowman* are dream visions that feature allegorical elements; *Cleanness* is a homily in verse; and the *Libro de Buen Amor* is a *sui generis* combination of a collection of short tales and a confessional text. Despite these differences, the texts of this multilingual corpus all face similar questions and deploy similar means; they belong to the same debate surrounding the status of the vernacular and the practice of vernacular translation.

#### IV. GLUTTONOUS TRANSLATIONS

In the chapters that follow, I will examine the figures of consumption that these four European writers have deployed in their writings and demonstrate how they can be interpreted as figures of translation. In doing so, I will repeatedly return to a single figure which, I believe, became a customary and recognizable way of alluding to the deployment of the vernacular and to the problems posed by vernacular translation: the figure of gluttony. I maintain that, in the devotional literature of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, gluttony came to be almost systematically associated with the treatment of

translation. In the homiletic and devotional texts that I have considered above, consumption served as a recognizable figure for reading—and especially for reading Scripture. In the religious writing of late medieval Europe, gluttony came to represent a corruption of this figure: the improper use, preparation, and assimilation of a text.

This deployment of gluttony as a figure for the problems posed by translation rested on a thoroughly attested exegetical convention: that of identifying the misinterpretation of Scripture with a sin of “carnalitas.” In religious literature, the noun “carnalitas” designated an immoderate fixation with matters of the flesh: lust, covetousness, lust. But medieval exegetes resorted to the term “carnalitas” to condemn vices of interpretation as well. For instance, evangelical parables such as “Dives and Lazarus” or “The Wedding Feast” were also associated with “carnalitas.” In the case of “Dives and Lazarus,” exegetes like Bonaventure contended that the gluttonous Dives and his family—who ate immoderately and who refused to pay attention to the teachings of the Bible—were damned because of their “carnalitas”; this was cited as the single vice which caused both their incessant feasting and their refusal to “listen to” Scripture. Similarly, since the *Glossa Ordinaria* treated the “Wedding Feast” as a figure for the “mensa Scripturarum” (“banquet of Scriptures”), Gregory added that the salvific meal offered in it was spurned by the “carnales” who “amplius rebus corporalibus quam spiritualibus occupantur” (“are more absorbed by corporal things than by spiritual things”).<sup>36</sup> In short, both narratives were thought to deal with scriptural interpretation; both were understood as admonitions against materialism; both culminated in a figure of damnation. All these connotations were enabled by this notion of “carnalitas”: a longing for the flesh, combining everyday materialism and a shallow approach to Scripture.

From this standpoint, “carnalitas” shared many traits with the capital sin of gluttony. Both vices entailed an immoderate fixation with material concerns; both distracted one from the pursuit of

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<sup>36</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia*, PL, LXXVI, 1267 C, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*.

virtue and salvation; both confounded one's understanding of spiritual injunctions and truths; both encouraged further wrongdoing. Since its first appearance, in the taxonomy of "principalia vitia" conceived by Cassian in his *Conlationes*, the deadly sin of *gastrimargia*, *gula*, or gluttony occupied a particular position in the medieval classification of the capital sins.<sup>37</sup> First, its placement and its gravity changed often. Many Christian writers treated it as a sort of minor sin; because it concerned an indispensable human activity, it was deemed both inevitable and somehow trivial—like language, it constituted a constant reminder of one's mortal frailty and one's dependence on the material world. Other writers highlighted its dangers; they described it as the mouth to all other sins and associated it with the original sin in the Garden of Eden: the eating of the forbidden fruit. Second, gluttony was often associated with speech and language. In fact, the late Middle Ages witnessed the rise of an alternative categorization of the capital sins, where gluttony was replaced by the so-called "sins of the tongue": alongside eating and drinking, these included lying, cursing, swearing, and talking too much.<sup>38</sup>

In all the four works that I will analyze in the following chapters, gluttony appears as a figure of vernacular translation. I will argue that this use of a capital sin as a formal device to develop and convey theories of translation highlights the ethical and material consequences of this practice, and adds a prescriptive dimension to the purely argumentative threads that I have identified in these works. The figures contained in these four poems develop arguments about what translation achieves and how it functions; but they also reflect on the social and practical repercussions of vernacular translations, and propose precepts that determine how and why it should be used. The suppleness of gluttony in medieval taxonomies of sin enabled these writers to articulate different positions on vernacular translation: Dante and Juan Ruiz, for instance, regarded gluttony as an excusable sin, and

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<sup>37</sup> Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *I Sette Vizi Capitali. Storia Dei Peccati Nel Medioevo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

deployed it as a figure for translation within the context of an apologia. William Langland, on the contrary, associated gluttony with the unwarranted destruction of a shared good and linked this danger with the loss of morality and knowledge that he perceived in vernacular translation.

In the following four chapters I will examine how these writers articulated theories of vernacular translation that moved far beyond the limitations of Jerome's "sense-for-sense" and "word-for-word" binary. In the first chapter, "Esuriendo Sempre: The Redemption of the Vernacular in Dante's Cantos of Gluttony," I will examine how, in the final section of *Purgatorio*, Dante deploys the figure of gluttony to evoke and to bring to fruition the theories of language that he began to articulate in his previous works on this topic: *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. I will argue that the cantos that surround Dante's stay on the terrace of gluttony in fact contain his most emphatic and thoughtful defense of his use of the Italian vernacular in the *Commedia*, articulated through a series of encounters with Christian poets and through a coherent body of figures. In this section of his major poem, Dante resolves a contradiction that the previous two works left unresolved: *Convivio* treated the vernacular as imperfect and corruptible, and claimed that its eloquence and precision should be deemed inferior to those of Latin; on the other hand, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* asserted the superiority of the vernacular over Latin, based on the notion that the vernacular is spoken by more people and does not need to be taught. Read in the context of the poetical discussions that surround it, the figure of gluttony in the cantos of *Purgatorio* confirms that Dante acknowledged the limitations of the vernacular, and particularly its susceptibility to the passing of time. Yet, Dante argues that precisely because of these limitations the vernacular can be used to better elicit one's love for God, and therefore it should be considered better suited for the project of the *Commedia*. To reassert the readiness of the vernacular, Dante frames this exposition with two unique vernacular translations from Latin—one from the Vulgate, the other from Vergil's *Aeneid*.

In my second chapter, “‘Gloutounes to Serue’: *Cleanness* as a Defense of Vernacular Translation,” I will consider the anonymous Middle English poem *Cleanness*, one of the four alliterative poems contained in the prestigious “Pearl Manuscript.” Long neglected by critics, *Cleanness* is generally dismissed as a confusing collection of biblical stories that are loosely held together by a vague homiletic frame. My analysis demonstrates that, rather than as a self-standing oddity composed for a fringe audience of devout aristocrats, *Cleanness* should be read in the context of the fervid debate on vernacular translation that involved the English clergy towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, spurred by the Lollard movement and the circulation of the so-called Wycliffite bible. I will argue that the seemingly disparate scriptural episodes of *Cleanness* are in fact linked by their repeated depictions of cooking and consumption, and by their interest in the question of how to assimilate the Word of God. When interpreted as figures for vernacular translation, these passages of *Cleanness* make up a coherent argument. I maintain that the poet of *Cleanness* advances a distinctive perspective on this issue: The poem embraces the usefulness of vernacular translation, suggests how it could be used to promote orthodox beliefs, and warns readers against the dangers of contaminating translations with heretic interpretations or unnecessary details. In short, I suggest that the titular virtue of “Cleanness”—which the poem treats as an extremely difficult goal to achieve—should be understood as the measured practice of righteous vernacular translators: those who understand when and how to enrich the text of Scripture so that it may lead listeners towards its proper assimilation. In this sense, vernacular translation becomes successful when it achieves a balance comparable to that of moderation in eating; a good translator avoids unnecessary or misleading additions in the same way that a righteous eater avoids the sin of gluttony. All in all, *Cleanness* highlights how translation can work as an addition; the source text is altered, but this alteration can produce positive effects on an audience.

In my third chapter, “Glossing *Gloutoun*: The Losses of Vernacular Translation in *Piers Plowman*,” I will examine how William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* advances a position that can be deemed antithetical to that of *Cleanness*. While the anonymous alliterative poem treats translation as a process that adds to the source text, Langland sees the turn from the vernacular into Latin as a process that subtracts. I will argue that the treatment of Latin and the vernacular in *Piers Plowman* shows an exceptional awareness of the notions of linguistic specificity and untranslatability. For Langland, Latin possesses formal features that cannot in any way be reproduced into English; as a consequence, any translation from Latin into English involves a loss that has profound intellectual, ethical, and even spiritual implications. At the center of a memorable tavern scene, the figure of gluttony embodies this loss and its repercussions, but it also suggests a potential solution to it. For Langland, vernacular translation should never entirely replace one’s experience of Latin, although its use should be allowed when it is necessary.

In my final chapter, “Don Carnal’s Perpetual Struggle: Interpretation and Translation in the *Libro de Buen Amor*,” I will consider how the figure of translation as gluttony transcended the opposition between Latin and the vernacular for which it was largely used during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, I will examine how Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de Buen Amor* deploys this figure to construct a broader and more ambitious argument about language and interpretation. A book of concentric framing narratives and literary allusions, the *Libro de Buen Amor* introduces figures of gluttony and consumption to signal its interest in the question of translation. However, rather than just aiming at discussing how translation works and what it achieves, the poem advances the argument that all reading should be treated as a form of translation. Accordingly, I will examine how the *Libro* associates its figures of consumption with instances of deliberate semantic ambiguity. By treating any linguistic exchange as a dysfunctional attempt to convey any sort of stable “sensus” or “verbum,” the *Libro* offers the most eloquent rejection of Jerome’s model. Yet, rather than simply

stating the impossibility of all translation, the poem offer an alternative model where interpretation is achieved through a sequence of successes and setbacks, and where the decisive factor resides in the choices available to the translator and to the reader.

“ESURIENDO SEMPRE”:  
THE REDEMPTION OF THE VERNACULAR  
IN DANTE’S CANTOS OF GLUTTONY

Between 1303 and 1305, few years before he started working on the *Commedia*, Dante Alighieri began drafting two ambitious treatises where he explicitly dealt with the status of the Italian vernacular and the question of its relationship to Latin. In these two works he articulated some of the most compelling and original reflections on this subject that we can find in the literature of the western Middle Ages. Yet, these reflections were left unfinished—and, even more strikingly, they seemed to contradict each other. In the first of these works, *Convivio*, Dante treated the vernacular as the inferior language, arguing that it lacked the versatility and the accuracy of Latin, and that each attempt to translate a text—and particularly a poetical one—from one language to another would result in a failure.<sup>1</sup> In the second work, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he instead maintained that the vernacular should be considered superior to Latin, since it was spoken by a larger number of people and it was acquired almost spontaneously by children.<sup>2</sup> In the decades that followed, Dante did not ostensibly develop or resolve this contradiction. On the contrary, the *Commedia* seemed to make no mention of this question—even though, as Dante’s most ambitious contribution to the literature in the vernacular, it would have certainly warranted a discussion on the potential capabilities of this language, and a justification for Dante’s choice to use it for his major poetical endeavor.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Convivio*, he highlights how the many flaws of “volgare”—corruptibility, limitedness, discordance—legitimize the superiority of Latin—which appears unchangeable, versatile, orderly (I.3.7-14). Citations from *Convivio* are from Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. Franca Brambilla Ageno, *Le Opere Di Dante Alighieri 3* (Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he firmly maintains that “nobilior est vulgaris” (*vernacular is nobler*, I.1.5), since people do not learn it in schools, but speak it as their “prima vera locutio” (*first true language*, I.2.1). Citations from *De Vulgari Eloquentia* are from Dante Alighieri, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, ed. Claudio Marazzini and Concetto Del Popolo, 1a edizione, Oscar Classici 181 (Milano: Mondadori, 1990).

In this chapter, I will argue that the *Commedia* did in fact pick up and develop Dante's unfinished theory of language and translation,<sup>3</sup> and that through this development Dante did offer a justification for his use of the vernacular in the poem. Nevertheless, rather than treating this issue explicitly, as he had done in *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante conveyed his argument through a series of figures that appeared in the last section of *Purgatorio*: namely, the figures that surround the starvation of the gluttons on the sixth terrace. Dante derived these figures from *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. In *Purgatorio*, they served as allusions to—and as expansions and revisions of—his previous writings on this subject. As a consequence, this first chapter follows the development of a coherent set of figures that were deployed by the same author and in the span of a few years, in order to describe his changing attitudes towards the question of the vernacular and of vernacular translation. I propose that Dante's change in the use of these figures should be understood as a maturation in his thinking on this question, which led him to a cogent and deliberate justification for his use of the vernacular in the *Commedia*.

We can hardly overestimate the import of Dante's choice to compose a work as ambitious as the *Commedia* in the vernacular rather than in Latin—a choice that has been called “revolutionary and exceptional” in a recent overview of Dante's linguistic context.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, Latin would have constituted the most obvious choice for a poem that modelled itself after the *Aeneid* and the *Confessions*. As Albert Ascoli has pointed out,<sup>5</sup> Dante's reliance on the vernacular threatened to undermine his claim to be recognized as an *auctor* among his contemporaries, since premodern *auctoritas* rested entirely on Latin—the language in which one encountered both Scripture and the

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to this unfinished theory of language, see R. Weiss, “Links between the ‘Convivio’ and the ‘De Vulgari Eloquentia,’” *The Modern Language Review* 37, no. 2 (1942): 156–68; Florinda Nardi, “Dante Tra ‘Convivio’ e ‘De Vulgari Eloquentia,’” *Dante: Rivista Internazionale Di Studi Su Dante Alighieri* 2 (2005): 147–59.

<sup>4</sup> Tristan Kay, “Vernacular Literature and Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's ‘Commedia’*, ed. Simon Gilson and Zygmunt G. Barański, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 140–57.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

writers of classical antiquity. Indeed, in his *Vita di Dante*, Giovanni Boccaccio emphasized the radicalness of this choice by having Dante experience a change of mind about it. According to his account, Dante began composing the *Commedia* in Latin, “secondo che l’altezza de la materia richiedea” (“conforming to what the highness of the matter demanded”). Nonetheless, he soon realized that few of his intended readers would have been able to make sense of his greatest poetical undertaking if this had been written in Latin; as a consequence,

immaginando invano le croste del pane porsi alla bocca di coloro che ancora il latte suggano, in istile atto a’ moderni sensi ricominciò la sua opera e perseguilla in volgare.

picturing the bread crusts being given in vain to the mouths of those who are still sucking milk, he restarted his work in a style [that was] fitting to modern sensibilities and continued it in the vernacular.<sup>6</sup>

Boccaccio framed Dante’s resolution as a choice between two alternatives; he could either conform to what the “materia richiedea,” abiding by the norms of *decorum*, or respond to the “moderni sensi” of his contemporaries, fulfilling an assumed responsibility towards his audience. According to Boccaccio, either choice entailed a loss. Composing the *Commedia* in Latin meant sacrificing the range of its present and future readership; composing it in the vernacular meant sacrificing the “altezza” of a language implicitly deemed superior. The food figures of the “croste del pane” and the “latte” further underscored the gravity of Dante’s choice. His grandest poetic accomplishment would not be compared not the solid bread consumed at mass, but to the easily digestible milk fed to newborns.

Boccaccio included this account of Dante’s linguistic afterthought—accompanied by four Latin verses allegedly taken from his first draft of the *Commedia*—in all versions of the *Vita*, as if to compensate for a flaw for which he could find no ostensible justification in the body of the poem.

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<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Vita Di Dante* (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 1991), 174-76. My translation.

The episode was meant to serve as a response to a kind of criticism that, according to Boccaccio, many of his contemporaries directed at Dante.

Muovono molti, e intra essi alcuni savi uomini generalmente una quistione così fatta: che con ciò fosse cosa che Dante fosse in iscienza solennissimo uomo, perché a comporre così grande, di sì alta materia e sì notevole libro, come è questa sua *Comedia*, nel fiorentino idioma si disponesse; perché non più tosto in versi latini, come gli altri poeti precedenti hanno fatto.

Many people, and among them some men [who are] usually wise, pose such a question: given that Dante was a most dignified man in [regard to his] knowledge, why he settled on composing such a great book, a book of such high matter and so notable as this *Comedia* of his, in the Florentine language; why he [did] not [do so] instead in latin verses, as previous poets have done.<sup>7</sup>

Still, although the *Commedia* ostensibly lacks an explicit rationale to justify its use of the vernacular, Dante himself deals with the question posed by the “savi uomini” of Boccaccio’s *Vita* in at least two of his earlier works: the first treatise of *Convivio* and the entirety of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. To an extent, both these texts articulate answers that could be applied to the composition of the *Commedia*. In what follows, I will summarize the arguments advanced in these two defenses of the vernacular, roughly coeval and likely driven by the same aspirations, yet often antithetical in their particular methods and positions. I argue that these two texts form the basis for the justification of the vernacular that unfolds in *Purgatorio*’s cantos of gluttony.

## THE CANTOS OF GLUTTONY

Before I turn to *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, I will provide a brief account of what happens in the cantos of gluttony of *Purgatorio*—the context that Dante chooses for his justification of the vernacular. On the sixth and seventh terrace of *Purgatorio* (cantos XXI-XXVII), Dante encounters five Christian poets: Statius, Forese Donati, Bonagiunta da Lucca, Guido Guinizzelli, and

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<sup>7</sup> Boccaccio, *Vita*, 172.

Arnaut Daniel. With them he discusses the reception of Vergil's *Aeneid*, the greatness of Provençal lyric, and the inception of the school of poetry to which he belongs. Considered as a whole, these discussions make up the most sustained exposition of literary criticism that we find in the *Commedia*. Here Dante establishes a genealogy of poetical precursors, situates himself and his contemporaries within this chronology, and famously alludes to the originality of his “dolce stil novo” (‘sweet new style,’ XXIV.57), in order to distinguish it from the style of his predecessors. Moreover, these seven cantos underline the multiplicity of languages in which these poets composed their works, and hint at the practice of vernacular translation that facilitated their exchanges and often underlay their production. In particular, they include Dante’s most notorious mistranslation from the *Aeneid* (XXII.40-41); his only lines in a vernacular other than Italian in the whole *Commedia* (XXVI.140-47); and his only vernacular translation from the text of the Beatitudes in all of *Purgatorio* (XXIV.15154). Finally, besides the motifs of poetry and translation, these cantos are held together by figures of hunger and thirst, from the “sete natural” (‘natural thirst,’ XXI.1) for knowledge that motivates Dante at the beginning of the section, to the diverse “fami” (‘hungers,’ XXVII.117) for happiness that Vergil mentions before his farewell. Even the unremitting fire of the seventh terrace (XXV-XXVI), which scorches the shades of the lustful, is lamented as a torment of “sete”—to which Guinizelli immediately adds the “maggior sete” (‘greater thirst,’ XXVI.18-20) of his curiosity concerning Dante’s identity.

Since they precede and follow Dante’s stay on the sixth terrace (XXII-XXIV), the terrace of gluttony, these figures of hunger and thirst draw attention to the particular torment that is perpetrated here. While in *Inferno* the shades of the gluttons are subjected to the torment of everlasting hail, the gluttons of *Purgatorio* atone their sin through starvation. For this reason, the terrace of gluttony looks unique. All around this terrace Dante finds several tall trees, planted at regular intervals, and from whose branches, sprouting high up, hang many mouthwatering fruits.

Their irresistible fragrance pervades the air, while rivulets of sweet-smelling water wet the leaves but not the soil far below. The shades of the gluttons spend days, years, decades, trudging from tree to tree, craving the fruits and the water that remain always beyond their reach, suffering hunger and thirst. This craving alone—which, since the shades have no bodies, is not caused by any actual bodily need—shrivels their flesh and furrows their skin, turning their countenance into a legible manifestation of their human lack.

Gluttons starve, poets meet, and vernacular translation is foregrounded around the sixth terrace of *Purgatorio*. Yet, even though these individual elements have drawn great attention over time, relatively few critics have investigated the reasons behind the convergence of consumption, poetry, and translation in these seven cantos. In the mid-1970s, Mark Musa first proposed that the placement of Bonagiunta and Forese among the gluttons may have served to establish a parallel between this capital sin and the poetical shortcomings that Dante attributes to his contemporaries and predecessors.<sup>8</sup> Few years later, Richard Abrams similarly lamented the lack of critical interest surrounding Dante's choice of setting, and suggested that the sin of gluttony may stand for Bonagiunta's inability to follow Dante in his transition from the self-centeredness of his juvenile poetry to the genre of praise which he embraced in the second half of *Vita Nuova*.<sup>9</sup> Teodolinda Barolini attributed an analogous function to gluttony in her seminal monograph on *Dante's Poets*, where she extensively treated these cantos from the standpoint of Dante's eloquent self-citations, as well as the carefully studied literary genealogy which he establishes for himself through his conversations with these five poets.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Alison Cornish argued that in these cantos Dante offers an alternative to the sterile practice of "volgarizzamento" that he condemns in Brunetto

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Musa, *Advent at the Gates: Dante's Comedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), 124.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Abrams, "Inspiration and Gluttony: The Moral Context of Dante's Poetics of the 'Sweet New Style,'" *MLN* 91, no. 1 (1976): 30–59.

<sup>10</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Latini. According to her, Latini's allegedly pedestrian rendition of Latin texts into the vernacular would be contrasted with Statius' mistranslation of the *Aeneid*, which proves fertile in spite of its unfaithfulness; while the ostensible obscurity of Arnaut Daniel's untranslated speech—the only lines of the *Commedia* written in a non-Italian dialect—would demonstrate the necessity of vernacular translation among present and future readers of Dante's own poem.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I will draw on these investigations to offer a reading of *Purgatorio* XXI-XXVII that explains why all these motifs converge here, at the threshold of Earthly Paradise and right before Vergil's departure from the poem. I will consider not only the interplay between poetry and gluttony aptly observed by Musa, Abrams, and Barolini, but also the emphasis on vernacularity and translation recognized by Cornish.

In this chapter, I will argue that the figures of consumption that characterize these cantos are meant to justify Dante's choice to compose his major work in the vernacular rather than in Latin. From this standpoint, I maintain that they could be compared to the strategic self-citations considered by Barolini, in that they serve as a pregnant allusion to one of Dante's earlier works: namely, *Convivio*—the unfinished *prosimetrum* on which Dante worked before turning his attention to the *Commedia*. In particular, I believe that the first section of *Convivio* contains the seed of a food figure that germinates in these cantos of *Purgatorio*: the purgation of the vernacular, likened to the cleansing of a tainted barley loaf in *Convivio* and to the starvation endured by the gluttons in *Purgatorio*. Through this allusion, Dante resumes the meditation on the worthiness of the vernacular initiated in *Convivio* and in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*—his unfinished treatise on the subject of language. As he redeems his predecessors' lyric poetry, Dante also redeems the language of his past poetic endeavors and of his past *tout court*, affirming its preparedness to tackle the high theological speculation of *Paradiso*. The translations that punctuate this section ratify this redemption, exemplifying the

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<sup>11</sup> Alison Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy: Illiterate Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

transition from Latin to the vernacular. Finally, I propose that the figure of the starving gluttons serves not only to invoke, but to develop the defense of the vernacular elaborated in Dante's earlier works. Through the figure of gluttony in *Purgatorio*, Dante indicates that the vernacular is better suited to illustrate the glory of *Paradiso* because of—rather than in spite of—its limitations. Marks of human temporality and human lack, the limitations of the vernacular turn it into a language of desire, redeemed and reoriented towards its divine origin as the pilgrim reaches the summit of mount Purgatory.

## I. THE PURGATION OF THE VERNACULAR

### CONVIVIO: THE BREAD THAT ENLIGHTENS

I will now consider the first treatise of *Convivio*, where Dante introduces the notion of a purgation of language and the figures of consumption that he develops in *Purgatorio*'s cantos of gluttony. Like *Vita Nuova*, his earlier collection of lyric poetry, the *Convivio* is a *prosimetrum* where Dante supplements a collection of poems with a series of commentaries in prose. Nevertheless, unlike those of *Vita Nuova*, the commentaries of *Convivio* are meant to cover a broad range of philosophical, theological, and political topics, which vastly transcend the task of expounding the poems collected in it. Dante's original plan comprised fifteen treatises, of which he only completed four. As far as we can tell, therefore, the encyclopedic ambitions of *Convivio* approached those of the *Commedia*. Its many digressions constantly prompt readers to step beyond the subject at hand, reaching for a higher or more comprehensive truth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For a recent introduction to *Convivio*, see the collection of essays edited by Franziska Meier, *Dante's "Convivio": Or, How to Restart a Career in Exile*, Leeds Studies on Dante (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018). For a discussion of *Convivio* in relation to the *Commedia*, see Beatrice Arduini, "Le Implicazioni Del Convivio Nel Corpus Dantesco," *Medioevo Letterario d'Italia* 6 (2009): 89–116. Etienne Gilson has described the way that *Convivio* juxtaposes knowledge in "chunks"; see Etienne Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). In her recent study on *Convivio*, Maria Ardizzone has argued that Dante in fact seeks a comprehensive model of learning that could also serve as a political model for the Italian *città stato*; see Maria Luisa Ardizzone, *Reading as the Angels Read: Speculation and Politics in Dante's Banquet* (London:

To introduce the topic and the purpose of this all-encompassing work, and to justify his choice of composing it in the vernacular, Dante deploys a long and elaborate food figure—the figure that in fact lends this work its uniquely metaphorical title.<sup>13</sup> Dante calls this *prosimetrum* a “convivio,” or ‘banquet,’ because through its combination of proses and poems he intends to sate his readers’ hunger for knowledge. So, the book opens with this fundamental hunger. Its first line paraphrases the opening of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, which states that “tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere” (‘all men naturally desire to know,’ I.1). Dante explains that this desire stems from the immortal soul, articulates the physical or moral reasons that may prevent one from attaining it, and then proceeds to lament that “innumerevoli quasi sono li ‘mpediti che di questo cibo sempre vivono affamati” (‘innumerable are those hindered [ones] who always live hungry for this food,’ 1.I.6). This complaint turns the innate desire for knowledge that characterizes all humans into an urgent feeling of hunger, which seems to affect some people more than others. The adjective “innumerevoli” and the adverb “sempre” amplify the scope of this need.

Faced with this ubiquitous hunger for knowledge, the speaker of *Convivio* introduces himself as a sort of intermediate agent within this figurative setting, placed between two domains of low and high knowledge. Dante imagines that the knowledge to which all people ultimately aspire corresponds to the food that is served at a divine banquet, reserved for those who are blessed with the gifts of learning and wisdom. Far from this banquet one finds the humble fields of those who are bound to stay hungry. Dante places himself between these positions: He is removed both from the banquet and from the fields, near the blessed who eat with the angels, and yet still low on the ground like those who crave better nourishment.

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University of Toronto Press, 2016). On the convergence of theological and intellectual pursuits in *Convivio*, see Paolo Falzone, *Desiderio della Scienza e Desiderio di Dio nel Convivio di Dante* (Bologna, Italy: Il mulino, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> The exceptionality of this figure in Dante’s production has been examined by Laurence E. Hooper, “Dante’s ‘Convivio’, Book 1: Metaphor, Exile, ‘Epochē,’” *MLN* 127, no. 5 (2012): 86–104.

E io adunque, che non seggio a la beata mensa, ma, fuggito de la pastura del vulgo, a' piedi di coloro che seggiono ricolgo di quello che da loro cade, e conosco la misera vita di quelli che dietro m'ho lasciati, per la dolcezza ch'io sento in quello che a poco a poco ricolgo, misericordievolmente mosso, non me dimenticando, per li miseri alcuna cosa ho riservata, la quale a li occhi loro, già è più tempo, ho dimostrata; e in ciò li ho fatti maggiormente vogliosi.

And so, I—[I], who do not sit at the blessed table, but, fled from the pasture of the masses, [being] at the feet of those who sit, gather [pieces] of that which falls from them, and know the wretched life of those that I have left behind— because of the sweetness of what I hear in that which I gather little by little, moved by mercy, without forgetting myself, [I] have reserved some things for the wretched, which I have shown to their eyes some time ago; and, in doing so, I have made them more yearning.

*Conv.* 1.I.10

Somewhere between the “beata mensa” and the “pastura del vulgo,” Dante collects and dispenses crumbs of knowledge for those who seem more needy than him. His poetical production is described as a kind of leftover: the “alcuna cosa [...] riservata” which he does not consume but share with others, in order to feed them and to make them “maggiormente vogliosi”—more eager to consume the knowledge they truly seek.

This opening establishes not only two domains of knowledge, but also two languages. Dante’s word for vernacular, “vulgare” (1.V.1) could be literally paraphrased as “del vulgo”: the possessive phrase which Dante refers to the low knowledge consumed in the “pastura.” The “pastura” is “vulgare”: This eloquent detail anticipates one of the aspects of *Convivio* that Dante will feel the need to justify in the pages that follow; being meant for the hungry “vulgo,” the book is also written in the “vulgare.” As a consequence, the two classes of knowledge that are consumed in this elaborate figure acquire a linguistic connotation: the earthly “erba e ghiande” are associated with the vernacular, while the heavenly “pane de li angeli” can plausibly be identified with Latin. Divided not only between two domains of knowledge, but between two languages, Dante acts both as an intermediate and as a translator. Like the citation from the *Metaphysics* with which the book opens, the

crumbles of knowledge that he gathers at the feet of the blessed have been conveyed to him in Latin, and the process of “dimostra[re]” them to the wretched—the verb means both “to show” and “to expound”—demands a turn to the vernacular.

As a consequence, the fundamental figure of *Convivio* designates a process of translation; a turn from a high context to a lower one, from the “beata mensa” of Latin to the vernacular songs that can be consumed by the hungry “vulgo.” The collection of poems is thus presented as a second banquet of knowledge, where Dante does not appear as a guest, but as the host and the steward.

Per che ora volendo loro apparecchiare, intendo fare un generale convivio di  
ciò ch’i’ ho loro mostrato, e di quello pane ch’è mestiere a così fatta vivanda,  
senza lo quale da loro non potrebbe esser mangiata.

Therefore, by laying them all [as if on a table], I wish to offer a general  
banquet of what I have shown them, and of that bread which is a necessary  
accompaniment for such a dish, without which it could not be eaten by them.

*Conv.* 1.I.10

This passage changes the setting of the figure. Dante is now serving a “generale convivio” that comprises multiple dishes. In what follows, he clarifies that the main meal served at this banquet corresponds to the several *canzoni* that he has already composed and published—the “cosa [...] rimasta” which he collected from the “beata mensa.” The “pane” that accompanies this dish, on the other hand, constitutes a new addition: It corresponds to the prose commentaries in which he expounds and glosses the songs. Dante underlines the important function of this “pane,” stressing that the *canzoni* could not be understood without it. All in all, his responsibility has grown in this figure. Rather than simply saving some leftovers for the needy, Dante must “apparecchiare” the banquet, whet the appetite of the guests, and make sure that the “pane” they consume can serve as an adequate complement to the main dish.

At once secondary and indispensable, humble and enlightening, the “pane” of Dante’s prose grows in importance in the first pages of *Convivio*. In part, this happens because this same introduction serves as a demonstration of what this bread can accomplish. In the rich and expressive prose of this section, Dante showcases the versatility and syntactic complexity that will characterize the rest of his exposition. Yet, rather than openly praising the quality of the “pane” that he is showcasing, Dante chooses to further complicate this figure by attributing yet another task to his role as a steward: that of purging this bread from its imperfections.

Nel cominciamento di ciascuno bene ordinato convivio sogliono li sergenti prendere lo pane apposto e quello purgare da ogni macula. Per che io, che ne la presente scrittura tengo luogo di quelli, da due macule mondare intendo primieramente questa esposizione, che per pane si conta nel mio corredo.

At the beginning of every properly arranged banquet, the stewards usually take the bread provided and purge it from all stains. Therefore I, who in this text fulfill their role, wish to start by cleansing this exposition—which serves as bread in my arrangement—from two stains.

*Conv.* 1.II.1

From this point on, this notion of “purgare” takes hold of this figurative introduction. This choice of diction comes across as one of the most intriguing—and perhaps as one of the least consistent—rhetorical inventions that characterize the opening of *Convivio*. To understand its implications, it should first be noted that the vivid figure that Dante paints here suits its immediate context only in part. Since the “sergenti” to which he alludes supposedly cut out and discard parts of the food served to their guests, this figure would befit a textual excision: the removal of features and the avoidance of topics that one deems unworthy of being included in a text like *Convivio*. The concreteness of this image suggests a sort of linguistic and formal effort—at attempt to materially transform the prose—which Dante does not perform in *Convivio*.

In the pages that follow, Dante removes nothing from the bread of his commentary. Instead, he proceeds to direct “lo coltello del mio giudizio” (‘the knife of my judgment’) at potential accusations of writing something “illicito” and “non ragionevole” (‘illicit’ and ‘unreasonable,’ 1.II.2); in other words, to justify what he intends to write, not to emend it. His “purgare” consists in listing a series of apparent flaws that a reader may attribute to his commentary—for instance, the fact that he talks about himself too much (1.II.2)—and in articulating reasons that justify his choices—for instance, the fact that Augustine and Boethius also talked about themselves in their works (1.II.13-14). This ‘purgare’ culminates in Dante’s justification of the vernacular, to which he dedicates nine out of the thirteen paragraphs that comprise this first treatise. Still, while it is placed alongside the other apparent rhetorical flaws of *Convivio*, this particular “macula” seems greater and more troublesome than the rest. Indeed, here Dante introduces a revealing distinction: The rhetorical “macule” that he has justified so far should be considered accidental flaws, while the language chosen for the composition of the treatise could be regarded as a substantial one. In figurative terms, the bread that he has decided to offer at his banquet is now revealed to be made of rye rather than wheat.

Poi che purgato è questo pane da le macule accidentali, rimane ad escusare lui da una sustanziale, cioè da l’essere vulgare e non latino; che per similitudine dire si può di biado e non di frumento.

After this bread has been purged of its accidental flaws, it remains to be excused from a substantial one, that is from it being vernacular and not Latin; [so] that, through a simile, one can say that [it is made] of rye and not of wheat.

*Conv.* 1.V.1

The “vulgare” does no longer coincide with one of the “macule” removed by the steward; rather, it has become the very substance of the bread served at the banquet: not noble bread “di frumento” ([made] of wheat), but cheap bread “di biado” ([made] of barley, *ibid.*). It should be noted that this

distinction does not match a rhetorical change in the way Dante approaches the task of “purgare”; in the pages that follow, he still proceeds to offer a justification for a flaw that he deems only apparent.

Rather, this clarification concerning the very substance of the accompaniment that he offers to his readers seems to underline the gravity of his choice, and to suggest that this linguistic shift presupposes a qualitative difference which should be considered further. The figure deployed by Dante invites us to reflect on the newness of his decision, but the argumentative treatment of this “macula” does not fully clarify what this shift entails. Still, as he begins to present the reasons that have led him to this choice, Dante underlines the potential indecorousness of this mismatch between the genre of *Convivio* and its language. Learned commentaries, like the one he provides in these treatises, were customarily written in Latin; this happened—for instance—for most of the earliest glosses to the *Commedia*.

Grande vuole essere la scusa, quando a così nobile convivio per le sue vivande, a così onorevole per li suoi convitati, s'appone pane di biado e non di frumento; e vuole essere evidente ragione che partire faccia l'uomo da quello che per li altri è stato servato lungamente, sì come di comentare con latino.

There needs to be a great excuse, when at a banquet that is so noble for its dishes, so honorable for its guests, one lays bread of barley and not of wheat; and there needs to be a clear reason to make one depart from what has been observed by many for a long time, such as glossing in Latin.

*Conv.* 1.X.1

Dante’s “grande scusa” for his use of the vernacular includes some of his most famous statements on the status of the two languages and on the effectiveness of translations. Here we learn that, although he deems “latino” more effective and versatile, Dante writes *Convivio* in the “volgare” because he regards this commentary as a “servo” (‘attendant,’ 1.V.6) of the *canzoni*. Since these are composed in Italian, a Latin auxiliary would suit them imperfectly, and create an unnecessary encumbrance for both author and reader (1.VI-VII). Furthermore, the adoption of the “volgare” presupposes more

“liberalitade” (“generosity,” 1.VIII.1), since it reaches a broader public (1.IX), and more “amore” (‘love,’ 1.X.5), since it allows him to “magnificare” (‘upgrade,’ 1.X.6) the language that he feels friendlier and closer to him (1.XIII). Dante further explains that avoiding Latin prevents foreigners, “come a Tedeschi e Inghilesi e altri” (‘such as Germans and English and others,’ 1.VII.13), from learning about *canzoni* whose formal beauty they would never be able to enjoy, since this quality cannot at all be translated.

E però sappia ciascuno che nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzata si può de la sua loquela in altra trasmutare senza rompere tutta sua dolcezza e armonia.

And therefore, everybody should know that no work that has been harmonized according to a musical coupling can be transferred from its language to another without breaking all its sweetness and harmony.

*Conv.* 1.VII.14

All in all, although Dante’s “grande scusa” for his use of the vernacular in *Convivio* maintains that great differences exist between the vernacular and Latin, his actual argument tells us little about what the vernacular can do differently. He insists on the broader audience that can be reached with a vernacular work, and on the privileged relationship that he has developed with it, but he hardly touches upon the qualities that might make this “pane di biado” more suitable for the popularizing project of *Convivio*.

This dissonance between the figure deployed by Dante and the argument that this figure should illustrate is further complicated by the religious undertones that pervade this opening. Besides the two connotations of the verb “purgare” that I have considered so far—the material cleansing and the rhetorical justification—Dante seems to have chosen this term for its spiritual implications. Here Dante anticipates the religious connotation that “purgare” acquires in *Purgatorio*, where of course the verb does not indicate a material cleanse, but a spiritual one. When, in the first section of this

canticle, Iacopo del Cassero reveals that he aspires to “purgar le gravi offese” (‘purge the grave offenses,’ V.72) that he has committed in life, he intends to say that these “offese” will be expiated through his suffering and thanks to the prayers of those whom he left behind. His “purgar” does not cut out any part of his past, of his memory, or of his soul; rather, it redeems him, renews him, and prepares him to continue with his journey towards God. This section of *Convivio* performs an analogous operation on Dante’s “esposizione”; it evokes an expiation of rhetorical and linguistic sins, a “mondare”—another purgatorial verb, used for Marco Lombardo (XVI.31)—of the spiritual “macule” that taint Dante’s “scrittura.” In a way, the purging of the rhetorical and linguistic “macule” of the *Convivio* should unfold like a confession and an expiation.

While Dante’s justification for the vernacular offers little in terms of repentance, the spiritual connotation of “purgare” befits the context of this introduction, which is rich in evangelical and liturgical allusions. In the opening lines of *Convivio*, for instance, Dante’s reference to hunger turns Aristotle’s statement about the human desire for knowledge into a Christian tenet. Dante shifts from the detached exposition of the first few sentences, where he details the seemingly unchangeable circumstances that prevent many from acquiring the knowledge that they “naturalmente desiderano,” to the heartfelt disclosure of a lack for which one could and should seek a remedy. After all, the Gospel prescribes the feeding of the “affamati” (Matt 25:35-40). In the lines that follow, this understated allusion to Christian morality blossoms into an unmistakable reference to the text of the Beatitudes.

Oh beati quelli pochi che seggiono a quella mensa dove lo pane de li angeli si manuca! e miseri quelli che con le pecore hanno comune cibo! Ma però che ciascuno uomo a ciascuno uomo naturalmente è amico, e ciascuno amico si duole del difetto di colui ch’elli ama, coloro che a così alta mensa sono cibati non senza misericordia sono inver di quelli che in bestiale pastura veggiono erba e ghiande sen gire mangiando. E acciò che misericordia è madre di beneficio, sempre liberalmente coloro che sanno porgono de la loro buona ricchezza a li veri poveri, e sono quasi fonte vivo, de la cui acqua si refrigera la naturale sete che di sopra è nominata.

Oh, blessed are those few who sit at that table where the bread of the angels is eaten! and wretched are those who share their food with sheep! But, because each man is friend to each man, and each friend suffers for the lack [suffered by] the one whom he loves, those who are fed at such a high table are not without mercy for those whom they see going on a bestial pasture, eating grass and acorns. And, since mercy is the mother of assistance, those who know give of their righteous wealth to the true poor, always generously, and they are similar to a spring of life, whose water quenches the natural thirst that is mentioned above.

*Conv.* 1.I.7-9

By echoing the “beati” exalted in the Sermon of the Mount—the text that punctuates *Purgatorio* (Matt. 5:3-11)—and by evoking the Christian imagery of “angeli,” “mensa,” “pane,” and even “pecore,” the two interjections strengthen the evangelical connotation of the “affamati.” The obligation to feed the hungry is placed in a scriptural context; so, Dante’s exposition has veered from the philosophical arguments of Aristotle to the moral injunctions of Scripture. Given the Christian coloring that suffuses this passage, the presence of a “purged” loaf of bread at the banquet of *Convivio* might certainly suggest a liturgical and evangelical implication.

Indeed, while Dante’s argument on the vernacular of *Convivio* steers away from theology, the figures that he deploys grow increasingly theological. In its final appearance, the barley bread that he has sliced and offered to his guests is imbued with a luminous quality that recalls the evangelical episode of the Supper at Emmaus, that of the Feeding of the 5000, and the salvific function accorded to the Eucharist.

Questo sarà quello pane orzato del quale si satolleranno migliaia, e a me ne soperchieranno le sporte piene. Questo sarà la luce nuova, sole novo, lo quale surgerà là dove l’usato tramonerà e darà lume a coloro che sono in tenebre e oscuritate per lo usato sole che a loro non luce.

This will be that barley bread that will sate thousands, and my full baskets will be overflowing with it. This will be the new light, the new sun, which will rise there where the accustomed one will set, and [which will] give light to those who are in shadows and darkness because of the accustomed sun which does not illuminate them.

*Conv.* 1.XIII.12

In this complex and allusive passage, the figure of the humble bread served at the banquet of knowledge fuses with the astronomical figure of a “sole novo,” bound to supplant the “usato” in a shared horizon of learning. Through this jarring fusion of a heavenly and an ordinary referent, Dante stresses how the form of his commentary will provide a new source of enlightenment, capable of bringing clarity to those who have so far been excluded from established avenues of edification. I assume, like many other critics,<sup>14</sup> that the “usato” sun stands for Latin, a declining language which can no longer stretch its light where it is most needed; on the contrary, the “novo” represents the vernacular, a language that, in its unstoppable ascent, will be understood by “migliaia.” Dante maintains that the commentary of *Convivio* should serve this multitude; indeed, in a previous paragraph, he remarks how “lo latino averebbe a pochi dato lo suo beneficio, ma lo volgare servirà veramente a molti” (‘Latin would have accommodated few, but the vernacular will assist very many,’ I.IX.4). Yet, with its future tense (“farà,” “sarà”) and its renewed imagery (“ombra,” “luce,” “colore”), the last sentence in this passage brings the prose bread to the fore, shedding on it a salvific light: From the figure of the banquet stems a figure of sight, and the bread of Dante’s commentary becomes the bread that enlightens. The popularizing function of the vernacular seems to acquire a moral and theological connotation which Dante suggests but does not fully articulate, and which will be fully developed only in the cantos of gluttony of *Purgatorio*.

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Daniel J. Ransom, “‘Panis Angelorum’: A Palinode in the Paradiso,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 95 (1977): 81–94; Alessandro Raffi, “Latino, Ebraico e Volgare Illustre: La Questione Della Nobiltà Della Lingua Nel ‘De Vulgari Eloquentia’ Di Dante,” *Lettere Italiane* 58, no. 1 (2006): 88–112.

## DE VULGARI ELOQUENTIA: THE LIGHT OF THE VERNACULAR

The figure of light with which the first treatise of *Convivio* comes to an end returns in Dante's Latin essay *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, whose two completed books—out of the four that he had originally conceived—were probably written sometime around the composition of *Convivio*. Indeed, within the long apology for the vernacular that opens *Convivio*, Dante reveals his intention to treat the present condition of Italian more extensively in a future “libello [...] di Volgare Eloquenza”<sup>15</sup> (‘pamphlet on vernacular rhetoric,’ 1.V.10). In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante sets out to achieve three goals. First, he intends to prove the superior nobility of the vernacular—which he calls “vulgarem locutionem”—over the codified variety of Latin taught in schools—which he calls “gramaticam” (1.I.2-3). Second, he proposes to identify a single variant of the Italian vernacular that could be deemed “decentiorem atque illustrem” (‘worthier and [more] prestigious,’ 1.XI.1) when compared with every other dialect spoken on the peninsula (1.I.10-16). Third, he resolves to define the most appropriate functions and occasions for which this “vulgare illustre” should be used, and the choices of genre, meter, and diction that would best befit it (2.I.1-14). This adjective, “illustre,” serves as the figurative link between the justification of the vernacular advanced in *Convivio* and the search begun in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Like the “pane orzato” of Dante's banquet, the desirable vernacular sought in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is meant to enlighten.

Per hoc quoque quod illustre dicimus, intelligimus quid illuminans et illuminatum prefulgens.

For this reason we call it “illustrious,” because we perceive how it illuminates and how it shines when it is illuminated.

DVE 1.XVII.2

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<sup>15</sup> For an account of how Dante approaches the question of language in these two works, see Alessandro Raffi, *La Gloria Del Volgare: Ontologia e Semiotica in Dante Dal Convivio al De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2004).

In the lines that follow, Dante clarifies that this light should be understood as a quality “magistratu et postestate” (‘of learning and power,’ *ibid.*), and that it derives from its emerging “tam egregium, tam extricatum, tam perfectum et tam urbanum” (‘so eminent, so lucid, so perfect and so civilized,’ 1.XVII.3) from the other variants of Italian. In other words, the figure of light establishes a continuity with the arguments advanced in *Convivio*, but it does not preserve the same religious connotations. Instead, Dante stresses that the exposition of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* concerns a linguistic investigation conducted within the boundaries of the Italian vernacular, and in order to achieve an intellectual and political goal. The “vulgare illustre” shines only in relation to other vernacular languages, and it does so because of its fitness for teaching and ruling—not for any particular theological quality.

Accordingly, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* presupposes the superiority of the vernacular over Latin, but without providing a truly exhaustive theoretical justification for this claim. In the span of a short paragraph, Dante simply asserts that “nobilior est vulgaris” (‘the vernacular [language] is nobler’) because “prima fuit humano generi usitata” (‘was the first to be used by the human kind’), because “totus orbis ipsa prefruitur” (‘it is deployed in all the world’), and because “naturalis est nobis” (‘it is natural for us,’ 1.I.4). These three basic arguments assume that nobility comes with primacy and universality; but, once again, they do not explain what—if anything—the vernacular could do better, or differently, than Latin. Yet, this kind of justification seems extraneous from the project of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. The Latin essay concentrates on delineating a method for improving the Italian language, and the literature written in it. Its leanness and overall structural simplicity—particularly striking when compared with the manifold tentacular digressions of *Convivio*—respond to this necessity: to provide scholars, poets, and rulers with a reliable guide on how to make the Italian vernacular better.

More specifically, the method which Dante articulates in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* involves two stages: first, a historical contextualization; second, an increasingly narrow selection of linguistic variants and features. The essay begins with an account of how languages were born; from Adam's first word (1.IV), through the Tower of Babel (1.VII), and into the various vernaculars circulating at the beginning of the 14th century (1.VIII). Dante then concentrates on the three cognate languages spoken between the Italian peninsula, France, and Iberia (1.IX), before zeroing in on the "vulgare Latium" (Italian vernacular) and on its many dialects. Having established this setting, he begins to "eici[ere]" and "cribre[re]" ("expel," "sift," 1.XI) the variants of Italian that he deems offensive to the ear, regionally inconsistent, or contaminated with foreign vernaculars (1.XI-XV). These evocative verbs highlight the methodical removals and exclusions involved in this process: the cutting away of coarse dialectal idioms, distasteful terms, awkward constructions. Furthermore, the treatise emphasizes how this choice of linguistic features should be based on two complementary criteria. On the one hand, Dante tends to adopt a comparative approach, drawing his conclusions from the juxtaposition of different languages. His review of syntax, for instance, incorporates examples in Latin, Occitan, French, and Italian (2.VI). On the other, his prescriptions stem from a cultivated poetical taste. Not only does this poetical taste legitimize his own idiosyncratic choices—such as the inclusion of "donare" and "gravitate" and the exclusion of "placevole" and "cetra" (2.VII); but it also explains his selection of linguistic evidence, which—apart from a few popular songs and refrains—comes largely from poets: among others Sordello (1.XV), Guinizelli (2.V), Arnaut Daniel (2.VI), and himself (2.II). Thus, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* proposes to construct a "vulgare illustre" by removing undesirable linguistic features, determined through the cumulative taste derived from an international and transhistorical cohort of poets.

At the basis of the method for linguistic improvement that Dante presents in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* we find a process akin to the "purgare" of bread that was introduced in *Convivio*: a removal

of imperfections. Indeed, in the treatise Dante seems to fulfill the figurative task of material cleansing that *Convivio* evoked but did not execute. Yet, the figure that accompanies this cleanse in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* does not belong to the domains of food and consumption, but to those of nature and horticulture. The lean and explicit form of this Latin treatise does not allow Dante to exceed in his use of figurative language; nevertheless, he binds together the exposition of his linguistic search by deploying a single, mostly coherent figure: that of the vernaculars of the Italian peninsula as a forest of trees.<sup>16</sup> He calls this forest an “ytala silva” (‘Italian forest,’ 1.XV.1); within it, he seeks a “pantheram [...] redolentem ubique et necubi apparentem” (‘panther that leaves its scent everywhere and that appears nowhere,’ 1.XVI.1), a sweet-smelling and evasive feline that serves as a figure for the ever-elusive “vulgare illustre.” So, Dante surrounds himself with scented trees that represent the vernacular languages spoken in his land. In this context, his method consists in clearing a path and in pruning the plants. So, for instance, he begins his investigation by describing how he must “perplexos frutices atque sentes prius eici[ere] de silva” (‘first of all remove the intricate shrubs and the thorns from the wood,’ 1.XI.1); from there, he proceeds to the “eradicacione sive discriptione” (‘rooting out or extirpation,’ 1.XI.2) of allegedly ignoble linguistic variants, and to the “erunc[are]” (‘weeding out,’ 1.XI.5) of the least pleasing dialects. Thus, the figure of “purgare” the language acquires a second potential connotation—a botanical one. In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the vernacular becomes a thick forest where poets must not only tend to the trees, but also follow the sweet scent of an unattainable prey.

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<sup>16</sup> Dante’s choice of depicting his linguistic search as a hunt is analyzed in Stefano Seleno, “Nella Caccia Della Lingua: La Gioia Di Dante e Lo Spettro Di Babele Tra Volgare, Vita e Arti Meccaniche,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 132 (2014): 59–85.

## II. OF POETS AND GLUTTONS

### THE TREE OF THE VERNACULAR IN *PURGATORIO*

The cantos of gluttony of *Purgatorio* are dominated by a figure that alludes to the “ytala silva” of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*: a series of trees whose sweet-smelling fruits entice the gluttons. I have already mentioned that the terrace of gluttony is set apart by a series of fruit-bearing trees that grow from the side of the mountain; as the poet Forese relates in detail (XXIII.61-75), the scent of the fruits, together with that of the celestial water that sustains them, causes the gluttonous shades to feel and display the signs of starvation. However, when the three poets Dante, Vergil, and Statius first encounter one of these plants, they do not register its punitive function. Instead, the tree interrupts the flow of their fecund conversation and—almost like a visual emblem—seals the sweetness of their fruitful relationship.

Elli givan dinanzi, e io soletto di retro,  
e ascoltava i lor sermoni,  
ch’a poetar mi davano intelletto.

Ma tosto ruppe le dolci ragioni  
un alber che trovammo in mezza strada,  
con pomi a odorar soavi e buoni.

They went ahead, and I alone behind, and I listened to their speeches, which gave me knowledge about composing poetry. | But soon a tree that we found in the middle of the path, with fruits [that were] delicate and pleasant to the smell, interrupted the sweet reflections.<sup>17</sup>

*Purg.* XXII.127-135

Because of their sweet scent and their pleasant taste, the fruits hanging from the tree can be deemed as “dolci” as Statius and Vergil’s speeches. Moreover, the speeches chime with the fruits phonetically;

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<sup>17</sup> All citations from *Purgatorio* are from Dante Alighieri, *Commedia*, ed. Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milano: Mondadori, 1991) and followed by my translations.

the nouns that designate the speeches (“sermoni,” “ragioni”) rhyme with the adjective that qualifies the fruits (“buoni”), and assonate with the noun that identifies them (“pomi”). These verbal echoes invite a parallel between the poetical “intelletto,” craved by Dante, and the fleshy produce which entices the gluttons; in other words, between the product of these poetical exchanges and that of the tree that frames them.

The fruitful exchange that involves the three poets who are gathered under this tree encapsulates the import of the greater linguistic and literary transition that occurs in the cantos of gluttony.<sup>18</sup> From a narrative standpoint, this cohesive section relates the final stretch of Dante’s ascent, before his arrival in the Garden of Eden. This segment of the journey starts with the violent earthquake that marks the liberation of Statius’ soul—between the last lines of canto XX and the first of canto XXI—and lasts until Vergil’s last speech, on the threshold of earthly paradise—with which canto XXVII comes to a conclusion. In other words, it begins with a poet’s momentous appearance and ends with another poet’s melancholy departure. These two episodes signal Dante’s readiness to approach the threshold of *Paradiso*. Now, like the Christian poet Statius, Dante has set his will to reach the beatitude of divine contemplation; has shaken off the fetters of sin; has been deemed ready to advance past the gates of Eden. Now, since his disciple has reached this theological summit, the pagan poet Vergil can no longer guide or instruct him and needs to withdraw.

The cantos of gluttony emphasize Dante’s preparedness to enter the third realm. Ahead of him—so close he can almost touch it— the pilgrim sees the fruit of his spiritual and literary journey, while his poetic vernacular has matured almost enough to be deployed in the third canticle. Indeed, this section of the poem sets Dante’s personal transition—his spiritual maturity to move into *Paradiso*—within the context of a broader linguistic transition—the shift from Latin to vernacular

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<sup>18</sup> Statius’s role in this important section of the *Commedia* has been investigated by Richard Lansing, “Statius’s Homage to Vergil,” *MLN* 127, no. 1 (2012): 91–98.

poetry. For this reason, the cantos that are bounded by the appearance of Statius and by Vergil's last speech could be known not only as the cantos of gluttony, but also as the cantos of poets.<sup>19</sup> Far beyond Statius' conspicuous presence, Dante chooses to fill the last tract of his ascent with a steady succession of poetical encounters—concentrating on the topic of poetry for a longer stretch than in any other section of the *Commedia*. Certainly, the author of the *Thebaid* serves as a conspicuous marker for the cohesiveness of these seven cantos, as he does not leave the side of the two travelers since his arrival in canto XXI. However, soon after his first exchange with Statius, Dante also meets Forese Donati—the old peer against whom he composed his infamously salacious juvenile *tenzone*<sup>20</sup>—in canto XXIII. Next, in canto XXIV, he is questioned by one of his 13th-century Tuscan precursors, Bonagiunta da Lucca. Later, in canto XXVI, he greets the recognized initiator of his literary coterie, Guido Guinizzelli. Finally, in the same canto, he hears some solemn lines spoken by a master of Provençal lyric, Arnaut Daniel. As a consequence, every major interlocutor with whom Dante speaks in this section—which, again, encompasses not only the two cantos set on the terrace of gluttony, but also the five cantos that precede and follow them—would have called himself a poet. On the whole, therefore, the cantos of gluttony could be characterized as a selection of dialogues between Dante and five poets of the past.

The choice and the treatment of these poets in this section of *Purgatorio* underlines the linguistic and literary transition that Dante intends to suggest. As he has done in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante cites the names of these five poets to locate his own opus within a tradition. Perhaps by design, the number of these Christian poets matches that of Limbo's great classical writers, among whom Dante placed himself when he embarked on his epic journey: “la bella scola”

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<sup>19</sup> In her commentary to the poem, Chiavacci Leonardi calls this section a “cammino fra i poeti” (“walk among the poets”), noting the contrast between the literary framework shared by these conversations and the political concerns that pervade most of the second canticle.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the “tenzone,” see Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, and Elizabeth Bartlett and Antonio Illiano, “Dante's Tenzone,” *Italica* 44, no. 3 (1967): 282–90.

(‘excellent school’) of Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, and Vergil (*Inf.* IV.88-102). On the threshold of *Paradiso*, the terrace of gluttony becomes the setting where this pagan “scola” is supplanted by a Christian one. Nevertheless, rather than a coterie of masters, the selection of these Christian authors seems to evoke the outline of a literary genealogy—one meant to move from Vergil’s Latin verse to Dante’s vernacular vision. The notion of a poetical lineage is corroborated by the dialogues that involve these five poets. As we learn from them, in the first century CE Statius linked the pagan world of the *Aeneid* with its subsequent Christian reception; in the 12th, Arnaut demonstrated the aesthetic potential of vernacular composition; in the 13th, Bonagiunta carried the Sicilian lyrical canon to Tuscany, Guinizzelli transcended this model to found a “new style,” and Forese accompanied Dante through the first part of his career. This genealogical sequence is corroborated by many familial tropes; Statius calls the *Aeneid* “mamma” (‘mum’) and “nutrice” (‘nursemaid,’ XXI.97-99); Forese calls Dante “frate” (‘brother’) twice (XXIII.97-112)<sup>21</sup>; Dante himself calls Guinizzelli “padre mio” (‘my father,’ XXVI.97); both Vergil and Statius repeatedly call Dante “figlio” (‘son,’ XXV.35, 58; XXVII.20, 36, 127). Through these endearing vocatives, the poets of this Christian “scola” compare themselves to the many members of a family.

Therefore, the scented tree before which Dante, Statius, and Vergil are standing serves not only as an allusion to the forest of vernaculars purged by the poet in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, but also as a figure for the poetical genealogy that links these poets together: a genealogical tree. Indeed, other passages of *Purgatorio* liken families to trees. The other great Christian poet of this canticle, Sordello, repeatedly resorts to this parallel to describe the discrepancy between past and present generations of rulers (VII.121-132). Ugo Capeto, the progenitor of the Capetian dynasty, uses it to evoke the

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, the noun “frate” is deployed as a term of endearment several times within *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Nevertheless, Forese alone resorts to it twice within the same speech and leaving only few lines between the two mentions. The close relationship between Dante and his friend is discussed in Antonietta Bufano, “Forese Donati Nel Canto XXIII Del ‘Purgatorio’: La Forza Dell’Amicizia,” *Italianistica: Rivista Di Letteratura Italiana* 15, no. 2/3 (1986): 219–37.

shadow that his family has cast over Western Europe (XX.43-45). Therefore, when Dante places three generations of poets—raised by a single “mamma” and “nutrice”—under the shade of a single tree, its knots and shoots almost inevitably recall the relations of kinship that have shaped these historically influential dynasties. Like these political genealogies, the trees of gluttony spread their branches wide, and sprout from a common origin: the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Dante and his fellow travelers learn about this single root two cantos later, as they leave the terrace.

“Trapassate oltre senza farvi presso:  
legno è più sù che fu morso da Eva,  
e questa pianta si levò da esso”.

Move past without getting closer: the tree that was bitten by Eve lies further up, and this plant rose from it.

*Purg.* XXIV.115-117

Accordingly, all trees are connected; their offshoots stem from the same trunk and converge towards the same dome of branches—both described as enormous in the allegorical procession with which the canticle ends (XXII.40-42).<sup>22</sup> Through these details, Dante projects the image of a massive tree that stretches from the terrace of gluttony—where he meets Forese and Bonagiunta—through that of lust—where he finds Guinizzelli and Arnaut Daniel—and up to the site where he is reunited with Beatrice; the same tree that he discovers while walking behind Vergil and Statius. Placed on the top of the purgatorial mountain, this tree serves as a figure for the literary lineage which Dante has embraced and surpassed in order to undertake the composition of *Paradiso* in the vernacular.

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<sup>22</sup> The complexity of this image is examined in Janet Soskice, “True Desire, True Being, and Truly Being a Poet,” in *Vertical Readings in Dante’s Comedy*, ed. George Corbett and Heather Webb, 1st ed., Volume 3 (Open Book Publishers, 2017), 31–50.

## THE STARVING SHADES

The tree of gluttony alludes to the “ytala silva” of vernaculars whose branches Dante pruned in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. On the sixth terrace of *Purgatorio*, therefore, Dante completes the search for the “vulgare illustre” which he has begun in the Latin treatise. But this search also alludes to the “purgare” of the vernacular bread portrayed in *Convivio*. It encompasses a material cleansing of the language itself; a justification for its use; and a spiritual redemption that makes it suitable for the theological exposition of *Paradiso*. All these elements are evoked by the figure that we find at the center of this terrace: the starvation of the gluttonous shades. Under the tree of gluttony, Dante discovers a group of souls who stretch their arms in vain to grasp the scented fruits that hang beyond their reach. As he approaches them, he discovers that their countenances are disfigured by a dreadful thinness.

Ne li occhi era ciascuna oscura e cava,  
palida ne la faccia, e tanto scema  
che da l'ossa la pelle s'informava. [...]

Parean l'occhiaie anella senza gemme:  
chi nel viso de li uomini legge ‘omo’  
ben avria quivi conosciuta l'emme.

Chi crederebbe che l'odor d'un pomo  
sì governasse, generando brama,  
e quel d'un acqua, non sappiendo como?

Each one was dark and hollow in the eyes, pale in the face, and so thin that the skin was molded by the bones. | The eye sockets looked like rings without stones: those who read ‘omo’ [the word ‘man’] in the face of men here would have well recognized the [letter] M. | Who, without knowing how, would believe that the scent of a fruit and that of a water could govern one so, generating desire?

*Purg.* XXIII.22-33

Evoking the “vulgare illustre” sought by Dante in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the bread cleansed in *Convivio*, these figures are shaped by an increasing excision of matter. This material cleansing—conveyed through adjectives like “cava” or “scema,” or by the preposition “senza”—is rendered as a linguistic achievement; as a process that makes the vernacular “more eminent” and “more perfect.” Similar to a written piece of parchment, the “pelle” of the gluttons is ultimately “informa[ta]” by this purgation, to the point of becoming legible. Therefore, Dante “legge” and “ben [...] conosc[e]” the vernacular word “omo” on their countenance;<sup>23</sup> later, he mentions how God “sfoglia” (‘peels’ but also ‘leafs through,’ XXIII.58) their ethereal bodies, like pages in a book. Rather than a deterioration, the punishment that these shades undergo on the terrace of gluttony serves as a figure for an accomplishment in the pursuit of the vernacular that enlightens.

The shades of the gluttons are identified with the language that they speak. The word that the starvation carves into their faces—“omo”—belongs only to the vernacular; this palindromic noun, and not its Latin equivalent “homo,” resembles the human skull that all the penitents share. Here Dante alludes to the argument in defense of the vernacular that he has advanced both in *Convivio* and in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*: In comparison to Latin, the vernacular is “natural,” closer to a person’s essence—it is not learned, but inherited. Thus, here Dante resumes the justification that he has introduced in the two previous works, asserting—again—that the primacy of the vernacular makes it superior to Latin. The vernacular should be preferred because it is shared by every “omo.”

The carving of the word “omo” on the countenances of the gluttons serves as a reference to the justification of the vernacular that appears in the previous two works that Dante devoted to this question. But, as a figure of the vernacular, it also serves as a substantial development of this

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<sup>23</sup> The vivid detail of the writing on the gluttons’ face is examined in Peter S. Hawkins, “Our Bodies, Our Selves;” in *Vertical Readings in Dante’s Comedy*, ed. George Corbett and Heather Webb, 1st ed., Volume 3 (Open Book Publishers, 2017), 11–30; Ronald L. Martinez, “Dante’s Forese, the Book of Job, and the Office of the Dead: A Note on Purgatorio 23,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 120 (2002): 1–16; George Andrew Trone, “The Cry of Dereliction in Purgatorio XXIII,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 113 (1995): 111–29.

justification. The carving is produced by the starvation of the gluttons—a starvation that happens in time. Dante can see this word on the countenances of his interlocutors because they have spent decades on the terrace of gluttony, waiting for the moment to move on and craving the succulent fruits that hang from the trees. The word signals the passing of time; it is inscribed there because of the passing of time. In both *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and in *Convivio*, the vernacular’s existence in time constitutes the essential quality that distinguishes it from Latin—and the cause of its inferiority. More specifically, in *Convivio* he adjudges the “volgare [...] non stabile e corruttibile” (‘unstable and corruptible’), and less versatile and beautiful than Latin (1.V.7-14). According to what Dante writes in these pages, the vernacular occupies a lower position because of its formal instability, its lack of harmonious beauty, and its limited versatility (1.III.7-14).

Così lo sermone, lo quale è ordinato a manifestare lo concetto umano, è virtuoso quando quello fa; onde, con ciò sia cosa che lo latino molte cose manifesta concepute ne la mente che lo volgare far non può, come sanno quelli che hanno l’uno e l’altro sermone, più è la virtù sua che quella del volgare.

So, language, which is meant to express human thought, is virtuous when it does so; therefore, since Latin can express many things conceived by the mind which the vernacular cannot, as those who have both languages know, its virtue is superior to that of the vernacular.

*Conv.* I.3.12

Similarly, in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he highlights the inferiority of the vernacular to the “sacratum ydioma” (‘sacred language,’ 1.VII.8) spoken before the fall of Babel. All these flaws depend on the corruptibility and lack of finiteness that Dante attributes to the vernacular; in other words, on its existence in time. Indeed, Dante develops a temporal explanation for linguistic corruptibility both in *Convivio* and in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. In the former, he explains that the “volgare [...] a piacimento artificiato si transmuta” (‘vernacular changes according to human tastes’), with “molti vocabuli [...] spenti e nati e variati” (‘many words faded, born, altered’) that can make a language unrecognizable

within the span of “mille anni” (‘a thousand years,’ 1.V.8-10). In the latter, he elaborates on this claim by attributing these inevitable alterations to the “confusio” (‘confusion,’ 1.VII.4) that followed the fall of Babel, and by correlating this temporal corruption with the changeability that affects every other human habit.

Cum igitur omnis nostra loquela—preter illam homini primo concreatam a Deo—sit a nostro beneplacito reparata post confusionem illam que nil aliud fuit quam prioris oblivio, et homo sit instabilissimum atque variabilissimum animal, nec durabilis nec continua esse potest, sed sicut alia que nostra sunt, puta mores et habitus, per locorum temporumque distantia variari oportet. Nec dubitandum reor modo in eo quod diximus “temporum,” sed potius opinamur tenendum: nam si alia nostra opera perscrutemur, multo magis discrepare videmur a vetustissimis concivibus nostris quam a coetaneis perlongiquis. Quapropter audacter testamur quod si vetustissimi Papienses nunc resurgerent, sermone vario vel diverso cum modernis Papiensibus loquerentur.

Therefore, since each one of our languages—except for the one which was created by God together with the first human—was reconstructed according to our will after that confusion, [confusion] which was nothing but a forgetfulness of the former [language], and [since] the human is the most unstable and most capricious animal, [this language] cannot be neither durable nor constant, but instead, like the other things that are ours, such as customs and habits, it must be varied according to the diversities of spaces and of times. I do not think that one should doubt the way that I have said “of times”; on the contrary, I believe that it should be maintained: indeed, if we consider other works of ours, we see that we are far more different from our very ancient fellow citizens than we are from our very distant contemporaries. Thus, I dare venture that if very ancient inhabitants of Pavia came back to life now, they would speak a transformed or different language in relation to the modern inhabitants of Pavia.

*DVE 1.IX.6-7*

When one considers them from this diachronic perspective, the changes that progressively alter the formal features of the vernacular begin to reflect the lacks that constrain its keeper—“homo [...] instabilissimum atque variabilissimum.” In other words, the flaws that characterize the vernacular derive from the same quality that makes the vernacular closer to “omo” than Latin; the reasons for its superiority coincide with those for its inferiority. The vernacular is restrained by the same

corruptibility, finiteness, and submission to time that defines humanity, and that constitutes one of the main thematic strands of *Purgatorio*.<sup>24</sup>

### III. THE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

#### THE CANTICA OF DESIRE

This realization lies at the core of the redemption of the vernacular that Dante sanctions in these cantos. Dante deems the “vulgare illustre” an instrument of redemption because it encapsulates and reflects the temporal finiteness of humanity. The finiteness, corruptibility, and existence in time of the vernacular, those qualities that make it closer to the condition of every “omo,” turn it into a language more suitable than Latin for the expression of what humans lack and desire. Because it shares the imperfections of humanity, the vernacular is now conceived as a language of desire: a language that can feed desire and that can make desire more readable.

This notion chimes with the uniqueness of *Purgatorio*, which treats waiting—the coincidence of mortal time and lack—as a fundamental dimension of human atonement. The canticle actually integrates these conditions into “amore”—that ‘love’ which, as Vergil tells Statius, “sempre altro accese, | pur che la fiamma sua paresse fore” (‘would always ignite another, given that its flame appeared visibly,’ XXII.10). Indeed, while describing the structure of purgatory (XVII.84-139), Vergil himself explains how “amor” serves as its fundamental organizational principle.

“Né creator né creatura mai”,  
cominciò el, “figliuol, fu senza amore,  
o naturale o d’animo; e tu ’l sai. [...]”

Quinci comprender puoi ch’esser convene  
amor sementa in voi d’ogne virtute  
e d’ogne operazion che merta pene.”

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<sup>24</sup> The importance of desire and lack in *Purgatorio* is analyzed in Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Dethologizing Dante* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 106-14.

“No creator nor creature,” he began, “was ever without love, whether innate or from one’s soul—and you know it. [...] | You may therefore understand how, inside of you all, love ought to be the seed of every virtue, and of every activity that deserves a punishment.”

*Purg.* XVII.91-105

Since it corresponds to the “sementa” of “ogne operazion,” both virtuous and sinful, love encompasses all kinds of objects and feelings. A person can love another person’s ill—like the proud, the envious, and the wrathful (XVII.112-23); or love too slowly, like the slothful (XVII.130-32); or love those possessions and gratifications that offer only an ephemeral and deceiving contentment (XVII.133-39)—like the greedy, the gluttons, and the lustful. Put otherwise, since Dante assumes that all human activity is driven by one or another configuration of love, love is identified with all sorts of desires. Furthermore, as the wrathful Marco Lombardo explains in his cardinal argument on the origins of evil, these diverse desires all originate in the same lack: one’s separation from God, the creator and the highest of all goods. Consequently, sin occurs because people tend to neglect this primary, existential lack, and instead strive to satisfy smaller or misleading appetites.

Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia  
prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla  
che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,

l’anima semplicetta che sa nulla,  
salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,  
volentier torna a ciò che la trastulla.

Di picciol bene in pria sente sapore;  
quivi s’inganna, e dietro ad esso corre,  
se guida o fren non torce suo amore.

Crying and laughing, in the manner of a girl who behaves like a child, she departs from the hand of him who longs for her before she exists: | [she is] the naïve soul, who knows nothing, except that she—prompted by a happy maker—gladly returns to that which amuses her. | At first, she tastes the flavor of a small good; there she is deceived, and runs behind it, unless a guide or a rein bends her love.

*Purg.* XVI.85-93

Distracted by the “sapore” of a “picciol bene,” souls confuse the lack of their “lieto fattore” with subordinate lacks: ambition, covetousness, libido, and hunger. Nevertheless, this original lack—this fundamental human desire—should be understood as the single feeling that can lead a person towards the pursuit of lasting salvation. The punishments described in the realm of *Purgatorio* serve to realign this human desire towards its legitimate object; to redeem this human lack by turning it into the means to reach God’s contemplation.

Therefore, the lack displayed as a sign of humanity on the countenance of the starving shades represents not only their gluttony, but also their potentially salvific desire. The gluttons are saved by the torment of their starvation because their hunger has been realigned with their existential lack: their distance from the “lieto fattore.” Therefore, *Purgatorio* turns the instrument of their sin into the condition for their purgation; the legible lack that informs their ethereal bodies into a manifestation of divine love. This *contrappasso* comes across as exceptional because the shades deliberately yield to it, aware that their submission ennobles their wait; that their thinning equates to the intensity of their virtuous longing. Forese Donati expresses this awareness in the account of the punishment that he offers to Dante.

Di bere e di mangiar n'accende cura  
l'odor ch'esce del pomo e de lo sprazzo  
che si distende su per sua verdura.

E non pur una volta, questo spazzo  
girando, si rinfresca nostra pena:  
io dico pena, e dovria dir sollazzo,

ché quella voglia a li alberi ci mena  
che menò Cristo lieto a dire ‘Eli’,  
quando ne liberò con la sua vena.

The scent that issues from the fruit and from the drizzle that flows above,  
through its greenery, kindles our craving for drinking and eating. | And not  
only once, as we go around this stretch, our suffering is refreshed: I say  
suffering, and I should say delight, | because that same desire that pushes us  
towards the trees, pushed Christ—happy—to say ‘E’li,’ when he freed us with  
his vein.

*Purg.* XXIII.67-75

Rather than a “pena,” the wait that the gluttons endure and manifest through their withering becomes a “sollazzo.” The punishment fuses their “voglia” with that of their supreme redeemer, “Cristo.” Accordingly, their lack embodies the deprivation and imperfection of all humanity, afflicted by sin; while the fervor of their desire imitates Christ’s willingness—his “lieto [...] *El*”—during his sacrifice. The purgation of the gluttons turns their finiteness into the instrument of their salvation; lifts their hunger towards the love for God.

As a figure for the vernacular, the purgation of the gluttons serves as Dante’s final argument for its superiority. Like the gluttons’ hunger, the vernacular is at once described as an indication of human finiteness and an instrument of its redemption. In the cantos of gluttony, those flaws that manifest the “prima vera” lack of humanity—the constraint of sin and the distance from God—are ultimately meant to ennoble one’s wait and align it with divine love. The purgation of language which Dante allegorizes in this section does not contradict this purpose; on the contrary, like the starvation that shapes the word “omo” on the faces of the gluttons, it makes it more conspicuous—more legible. Although, in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante proposes to prune the vernacular by removing those elements which he deems unpleasant or spurious, this process does neither put an end to its

gradual alteration nor fasten it to a “gramatica”; rather, it becomes one of the choices that prolong its constant and inevitable transformation in time. The vernacular becomes ready for *Paradiso* because this linguistic refinement makes it more suitable to signify Dante’s human finiteness, which should in turn drive one towards the love for God. Hence, not only do these seven cantos articulate Dante’s deployment of a “vulgare illustre,” but they also justify it theologically.

Dante’s justification of the vernacular as the language most suitable for his treatment of *Paradiso* rests on a paradox. The language should be considered superior because of its imperfections; suitable because of its insufficiency; ready because of its permanent unreadiness. These features extend to the selection and portrayal of the five vernacular poets who appears in the cantos of *gluttony*. These repeatedly emphasize their own limitations and those of their precursors. Judging from Dante’s own assessment, only few among them could aspire to the greatness of Homer or Ovid: presumably Arnaut Daniel, perhaps Statius or Guinizzelli. Conversely, the poetical achievements of Forese and Bonagiunta are explicitly deemed insubstantial when compared to Dante’s (XXIII.115-17; XXIV.55-57). Furthermore, Guinizzelli declares his inferiority to Arnaut Daniel’s mastery (XXVI.113-117); Bonagiunta describes how his contribution was outdone by the “new style” championed by his successors (XXIV.55-57); Forese embodies the immaturity of Dante’s earliest works, surpassed in the *Vita Nova* (XXIII.115-117); Statius transcends Vergil’s model by embracing Christianity (XXII.73-75). Put otherwise, the poets whom Dante places in the cantos of *gluttony* are characterized by their shortcomings; by the flaws that have encouraged them to seek sustenance in the works of their antecedents.<sup>25</sup> Yet, in the context of the sixth terrace and of the

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<sup>25</sup> This process of constant poetical influence, understood as a means to improve on the limitations of one’s precursors, constitutes one of the distinct thematic strands that afford cohesiveness to the “cantos of *gluttony*.” Certainly, other sections of *Purgatorio* offer comparable treatments of this theme. Its most eloquent encapsulation probably belongs to the limner Oderisi, who, on the terrace of pride, laments the ephemerality of fame in times of cultural and artistic dynamism (XI.94-99). However, despite these earlier allusions, the exploration of this theme culminates in the seven cantos that circumscribe the terrace of *gluttony*. Starting

theological justification of the vernacular that Dante articulates in it, the shortcomings that these poets attribute to their own works should be understood as an extension of the lacks that characterize the vernacular and that make it ultimately superior.

To highlight the unreadiness of these vernacular poets, Dante repeatedly compares them to children. For instance, before discovering the shades of Forese Donati and Bonagiunta da Lucca among the starving gluttons, Dante describes how these stand hungry at the base of the tree, raising childish sighs to express their frustrated craving for the fruits that hang high above them.

Vidi gente sott' esso alzar le mani  
e gridar non so che verso le fronde,  
quasi bramosi fantolini e vani

che pregano, e 'l pregato non risponde,  
ma, per fare esser ben la voglia acuta,  
tien alto lor disio e nol nasconde.

I saw people under it raise their hands and cry I do not know what towards  
the fronds, almost [like] small children, eager and shallow, | who beg, and the  
one who is begged does not respond, but, in order to greatly sharpen their  
wish, he holds up the thing that they desire, and does not hide it.

*Purg.* XXIV.106-111

These tercets compare the gluttons to minute, powerless infants, vainly crying for a gratification that remains outside their reach. The “voglia” that determines their condition is honed by the invisible hand of a fatherly superior, who keeps their aspiration constantly in sight, yet forever too far. Like the babyish gluttons, they make their voices heard because they strive to approach a fulfillment that they cannot yet attain. Later, Dante himself is compared to a hungry child. When Vergil mentions that Beatrice awaits him beyond the fire of lust, his excitement is likened to that of a “fanciul [...]”

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with Statius, who progressively takes on Vergil’s role as a guide (XXV.31-33), the poets gathered here have all seized the same “campo.”

ch'è vinto al pome” (*boy who is won by the fruit* XXVII.45). This “pome” is later identified with the sweet fruit of earthly bliss—the one goal that can sate his hunger.

“Quel dolce pome che per tanti rami  
cercando va la cura de’ mortali,  
oggi porrà in pace le tue fami”.

That sweet fruit, which the mortals’ care searches by going through so many branches, will sate your hunger today.

*Purg.* XXVII.115-117

Dante and the gluttonous poets are depicted as hungry children because they partake of the unreadiness and imperfection of the vernacular—the language that can best direct a person towards the pursuit of a “dolce pome.” This hunger—this lack—sanctions Dante’s readiness to ascend, but it also highlights his belonging to a larger literary tradition of vernacular poetry that shares the same redeeming imperfections.

In the cantos of gluttony, hunger indicates a shared linguistic and literary search that culminates—but does not end—with Dante’s approach to the threshold of *Paradiso*. The continuity of this search is rendered through a figure that highlights both the mutual connections between these poets and their permanent condition of unreadiness: Namely, their poetical upbringing is described as a diet of milk. This figure is first deployed by Vergil, who explains how Homer’s poetical preeminence resulted from a generous breastfeeding on the part of the Muses. More specifically, in the account of Limbo that he offers to Statius, he calls the author of the *Iliad* “quel Greco | che le Muse lattar più ch’altri mai” (‘that Greek whom the Muses breastfed more than anybody else’); then, in the following tercet, he refers to the Muses as “le nutrice nostre” (‘our nursemaids,’ XXII.102-105), implying that this same source of milk has sustained every subsequent generation of poets. Combined with the aforementioned reference to the *Aeneid* as Statius’ “mamma” and “nutrice,” this trope turns the relationships of influence and inspiration that unite these men into a string of hunger

and consumption. A poet brings forth works that provide generative nutrients; these inform the works of those who consume them—and so on. Like the water that sustains the fruits hanging from the trees, or perhaps like the sap that flows inside their trunks, this poetical nectar flows through history and across languages, allowing writers to purify their own vernacular as they digest the accomplishments of their predecessors.

Certainly, the cantos of gluttony spare no effort to demonstrate how Dante has digested the poetical works produced by his predecessors. Not only does the poet repeatedly allude to Statius' *Thebaid* and to its contents (XXII.109-114, XXVI.94-96), but he also incorporates several exact citations from Guinizzelli's *Rime* (XXVI.75-126); and he even launches into an impressive *pastiche* of Arnaut's Provençal (XXVI.140-47)—the only lines composed in a vernacular other than Italian within the entire *Commedia*. Embedded in the texture of the poem, these allusions function like the many quotations collected in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*; they allow Dante to savor and assimilate the styles of his models, and to perfect his own linguistic taste in preparation for the “vulgare illustre” of *Paradiso*. Moreover, the figures of the tree and the milk highlight how Dante is abiding by the methodology articulated in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Around the terrace of gluttony, he has placed himself under the genealogical tree of the vernacular, surrounded himself with an international and transhistorical cohort of poets, and he consumes their nourishing words in order to purge the vernacular of his poem.

## THE LEFTOVERS OF VERNACULAR TRANSLATION

The presence of these embedded allusions to the works of other poets in the cantos of gluttony highlights the continuous process of transmission that allows Dante's poetry to tackle the supreme matter of *Paradiso*. In other words, here Dante shows how the nourishing milk of his predecessors and contemporaries has been assimilated by the tercets of his major work. In two instances, this assimilation involves a linguistic shift as well—a translation from Latin into the

vernacular. These translations attest not only to Dante’s readiness to proceed, but to the ability of the vernacular to become a vessel—albeit imperfect—for the solemnity of epic and the holiness of Scripture. In particular, two vernacular translations distinguish this section of *Purgatorio*: a mistranslation from the *Aeneid* and a unique translation from the Sermon of the Mountain. First, in canto XXII, Statius invokes the “sacra fame de l’oro” that should have kept him away from the sinful neglect of all earthly possessions. Judging from its context, this ‘sacred hunger for gold’ ought to correspond to a divinely inspired measure, by which one should modulate the intensity of material desires. Nevertheless, the two lines uttered by Statius—“Perché non reggi tu, o sacra fame | de l’oro, l’appetito de’ mortali?” (XXII.40-1)—actually constitute a mistranslation of a passage from the *Aeneid*—“Quid non mortalia pectora cogis | auri sacra fames?” (III.56-7). In spite of their superficial similarity, these two rhetorical questions carry two radically different meanings. Critics have argued that Statius might have deliberately mistranslated the original, to adapt it to his own condition: a teaching about prodigality rather than greed.<sup>26</sup> The contrast would therefore show how the Christian poet could read more in the text than what his pagan predecessor intended. The imperfect translation might depart from Vergil’s original intention, but it allows Statius to draw a conclusion that can lead him towards salvation. Accordingly, I argue that this deliberate mistranslation shows how the imperfection of the vernacular can be deployed as an instrument to realign one’s lacks with the love for God.

While this first translation sanctions the vernacular’s ability to virtuously assimilate the matter of classical epic despite its flaws, the second translation directly confronts the theological aspirations of the *Commedia*. To signal the readiness of the vernacular, Dante uses it to translate Scripture—in particular, to render the fourth Beatitude, drawn from the Sermon of the Mountain. Dante cites this

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Felicina Groppi, *Dante as Translator* (Rome: Casa editrice Herder, 1966); Amilcare A. Iannucci, “The Mountainquake of ‘Purgatorio’ and Virgil’s Story,” *Lectura Dantis*, no. 20/21 (1997): 48–58.

passage twice in this section. In fact, unique among the six Beatitudes that punctuate *Purgatorio*, this verse from the Sermon of the Mount—“*Beati qui esuriunt et sitiunt justitiam: quoniam ipsi saturabuntur*” (‘Blessed [are] those who feel thirst and hunger for justice: for they will be sated,’ Matt. 5:6)—is split in two.<sup>27</sup> In canto XXII, while leaving the terrace of greed, the travelers hear the word “*sitiunt*.” Dante remarks that this single verb serves as an ellipsis signifying the entire Beatitude (6). Then, leaving the terrace of gluttony, Dante cites and expands the second part of the verse, the *esuriunt* (XXIV.151.154), uniting these cantos under a single theme. Here, for the first and only time within the entire canticle, Dante translates into the vernacular the Beatitude which the travelers hear as they continue their ascent.

E senti' dir: “Beati cui alluma  
 tanto di grazia, che l'amor del gusto  
 nel petto loro troppo disir non fuma,  
  
 esuriendo sempre quanto è giusto!”

And I heard say: “Blessed [are] those on whom grace shines so much that the  
 love of taste does not smolder too much in their bosom, | craving always  
 what is righteous!”

*Purg.* XXIV.151-154

Thus, to attest the construction of a “vulgare illustre,” Dante seals his departure from the terrace of gluttony with the only vernacular translation from the Beatitudes that a reader can find in the whole *Purgatorio*. Through this purged vernacular, attested in this unique scriptural translation and in the gerund “*exuriendo*” at its center, Dante can properly approach the exposition of those Christian mysteries that lie at the core of *Paradiso*.

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<sup>27</sup> V. S. Benfell, “‘Blessed Are They That Hunger After Justice’: From Vice To Beatitude In Dante’s *Purgatorio*,” in *The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals*, ed. Richard Newhauser (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 183–206.

The two vernacular translations that punctuate the cantos of gluttony stand out because of their imperfections. Like the vernacular itself, they seem justified because of what they lack. The translation from the *Aeneid* deliberately misinterprets the meaning of Vergil's complaint; while the one from Scripture splits and amplifies the fourth Beatitude, turning it into an admonishment against the gluttonous hunger that might distract one from the virtuous desire for divine justice. So, the vernacular translation that Dante advocates is meant to display its imperfections and its dependence on the original text. I believe that Dante offers a brief figure of this kind of translation in the scientific account of how all human bodies and souls are generated, at the core of canto XXV. Bridging the transition from one terrace to the other, this exposition incorporates several strands that characterize these seven cohesive cantos: thirst and hunger, genealogy, literary influence. As they ascend a narrow staircase, Dante asks his two companions, Vergil and Statius, a seemingly straightforward question: "Come si può far magro | là dove l'uopo di nodrir non tocca?" ('How can one grow thinner in a place where food is not needed?,' XXV.20-21) To solve this doubt, Statius—whose intellectual authority now surpasses Vergil's—relates the starvation of the shades to the formation of "virtual" bodies in the afterlife. In particular, these semimaterial entities emerge from the impression that the immortal souls leave on the air surrounding them, caused by their "virtute formativa" ('formative virtue,' XXV.38)—namely, the faculty of shaping matter into human organs (XXV.88-99). Within his explanation, Statius resorts to several tropes that complement the rhetorical texture of this section. For instance, he describes the formation of reproductive blood within the body as the result of a partial abstention from drinking.

Sangue perfetto, che poi non si beve  
da l'assetate vene, e si rimane  
quasi alimento che di mensa leve,  
prende nel core a tutte le membra umane  
virtute informativa, come quello  
ch'a farsi quelle per le vene vane.

The perfect blood, which is hence not drunk by the thirsty veins, and remains almost like a leftover taken from a table, | in the heart acquires informative virtue for all the human limbs, as the one that goes through the veins to become them.

*Purg.* XXV.37-42

Like the stretched yet legible skins of the gluttons, or the attentively sifted vocabulary of the “vulgare illustre,” this “sangue perfetto” resembles a leftover; the essential part that remains on the “mensa” once the “assetate vene” have ceased their “be[re].” Put otherwise, Dante’s embryological digression represents the forces and the mechanisms involved in the formation of bodies and souls in terms of eating, drinking, and food. Besides mentioning the “assetate vene” and the “alimento” that produce one’s “sangue perfetto,” he describes sperm as blood that has been “digesto” (‘processed’ or ‘digested,’ XXV.43) by the body, and compares God’s infusion of the immortal soul into the embryo to “il calor del sol che si fa vino | giunto a l’omor che de la vite cola” (‘the heat of the sun that becomes wine | combined with the juice that drips from the grapevine,’ XXV.77-78). These figures of transformation mirror the model of vernacular translation that Dante advances in these cantos. According to Dante, the translated text can aspire to convey only a small part—a crumble or a leftover, like those that he offers in *Convivio*—of the original; yet, from this thin substance one can generate new life.

## CONCLUSION

With this investigation I hope to prove the importance of food figures and the uniqueness of *Purgatorio* for our investigation of the literary theories developed by Dante. In the “cantos of gluttony” discussed in this paper, Dante compares his construction and deployment of a “vulgare illustre” with the purgation undergone by the shades of the gluttons—starved by their desire for a fruit that lies beyond their reach. As I have demonstrated, Dante’s framing and organization of this

section echoes his treatment of the vernacular in *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. From the former he draws the metaphor of the purgation of language, compared to a humble loaf of barley bread that should be cleansed from its stains. From the latter he draws a method; namely, a historical and comparative contextualization within a tradition of poets, and a progressive pruning of linguistic features deemed undesirable. The purpose of articulating and justifying his choice to compose in the vernacular—particularly as he prepares himself to approach the complex Christian theology illustrated in *Paradiso*—motivates the narrative, thematic, and rhetorical cohesiveness of these cantos. These situate the final stretch of Dante’s ascent in the shade of a tree that evokes a genealogy of poets, and whose fruits cause a persistent thirst and an irresistible hunger. This hunger and this thirst—repeatedly echoed in this section, and mentioned in the Beatitude that punctuates it—correspond to the lack that informs the shades of the gluttons, manifesting their human finiteness and aligning their wait with a salvific love for God. This redeeming lack characterizes Dante’s vernacular as well. With it he translates—for the first and only time within the entire canticle—the Beatitude spoken by an angel.

“GLOTOUNES TO SERUE”:  
*CLEANNESS* AS A DEFENSE  
OF VERNACULAR TRANSLATION

The small and unassuming manuscript Cotton Nero A.x—popularly known as the ‘Pearl’ manuscript—is regarded as one of the treasures of late 14th-century Middle English poetry. It contains the only extant copies of four alliterative poems ranging between 531 and 2530 lines, all transcribed in the same West Midlands dialect and all attributed—almost unanimously—to the same anonymous author.<sup>1</sup> Since their critical rediscovery in the late 19th century, two of these poems have been acclaimed as masterpieces: *Pearl*, the first in the collection, for its unique formal virtuosity and for its allegorical richness, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the last one, for its imaginative reinvention of Arthurian romance. *Cleanness*, the second poem in the collection, has not enjoyed the same fortune—far from it.<sup>2</sup> A puzzling assemblage of gruesome and seemingly disjointed biblical *exempla*, *Cleanness* is generally remembered as the poet’s unsuccessful foray into the homiletic genre.

Like a preacher delivering a homily, the speaker of *Cleanness* seeks to expound a theme drawn from Scripture: Jesus’ praise of the “clean of heart” in the text of the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:8). To illustrate the meaning of “Clannesse,” the virtue praised by Jesus in this versicle and the word with which the poem begins, the poet retells three stories from the Old Testament: Noah’s rescue from the Flood; Abraham’s and Lot’s encounters with God and with his angels, followed by the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of Jerusalem, followed by Belshazzar’s ruin as foretold by Daniel. Still, while vivid and compelling on their own, these

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent introduction to the Pearl Manuscript, see Jane Beal and Mark Bradshaw Busbee, eds., *Approaches to Teaching the Middle English Pearl*, Approaches to Teaching World Literature Series 143 (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1978), 55, where *Cleanness* is called a “failure” and “an unsuccessful poem” (55).

increasingly sprawling narratives seem to offer no insight into what the poet means by “Cleanness.” In fact, hardly supplemented by any extradiegetic commentary and briefly punctuated by two extraneous digressions on Lucifer’s fall and on the life of Christ, the three biblical episodes contained in *Cleanness* seem to offer no thematic consistency at all.

So, in spite of its placement in the prestigious ‘Pearl’ manuscript, scholars have tended to ignore *Cleanness*, deeming it little more than a loose anthology of experiments in biblical adaptation. Indeed, the scarce consideration that the poem has received largely depends on the vagueness of the “clannesse” that is meant to lend it its coherence. Although only few scholars have ventured an exegesis of *Cleanness*, the abstract noun at its center has been the subject of manifold interpretations, all corroborated by persuasive textual evidence. The poet’s undeniable emphasis on carnal vice and his frankly repulsive tirades against sodomy (see ll. 573-80 and 659-712) have warranted the identification of “clannesse” with the observance of Christian precepts on sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Morse has argued that the term should be understood in relation to a Pauline passage where human bodies and souls are compared to God’s “vessels” (Romans 9:20-23); by prescribing the purity, or “clannesse,” of the person as a vessel, the poem would therefore deliberately speak against a broad variety of transgressions, such as pride, lust, wrath, and idolatry.<sup>4</sup> Elaborating on the imagery of the vessel, Eleanor Johnson has connected “clannesse” and its contrary, “vnclannesse,” to the sacrament

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Twomey first noted how *Cleanness* distorts its biblical source by imputing God’s decision to send the Flood to the sin of sodomy, allegedly committed by Adam’s descendants; see Michael W. Twomey, “‘Cleanness’, Peter Comestor, and the ‘Revelationes Sancti Methodii,’” *Mediaevalia*; 11 (January 1985): 203. Recent criticism has proposed that the poem’s stance on sexuality may prove more nuanced than its evident bigotry may suggest. Michael Calabrese and Eric Eliason have highlighted how the poem contrasts its detestable intolerance against homosexuals with a surprisingly progressive embrace of sexual pleasure; see Michael Calabrese and Eric Eliason, “The Rhetorics of Sexual Pleasure and Intolerance in the Middle English ‘Cleanness,’” *Modern Language Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 1995): 247–68. In a similar vein, Allen J. Frantzen has examined how, when compared with other late medieval injunctions against homosexuality, *Cleanness* stands out for its remarkably explicit description of sexual desire; see Allen J. Frantzen, “The Disclosure of Sodomy in Cleanness,” *PMLA* 111, no. 3 (May 1996): 451–64. Finally, in her monograph on the subject, Elizabeth Keiser has concentrated on the potential novelty of this attitude towards sex, by considering *Cleanness* alongside writers such as Thomas Aquinas and Alain de Lille; see Elizabeth B. Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts* (London: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte C. Morse, *The Pattern of Judgment in the Queste and Cleanness* (University of Missouri Press, 1978).

of the Eucharist, and shown how the poem serves as a horrific admonishment against the supreme sin of desecrating the host.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Sarah Stanbury, Monica B. Potkay, and Arthur Bahr have associated the virtue of “cleanness” with one’s ability to see, discern, and interpret the presence of God—both in the physical world and in the forms that comprise the poem.<sup>6</sup> *Cleanness* allows and indeed invites all these concurrent interpretations.

In this chapter, I will argue that—among its many potential referents—the virtue of “Cleanness” should be understood as one of the distinctive qualities that characterize the poem itself. I contend that “Cleanness” refers to the method of translation deployed by the poet; a method that allows the poem to reach a multiplicity of readers while including a broad range of possible interpretations. In short, *Cleanness* develops a theory about its own making, and particularly about the way that its poet has strived to translate the text of Scripture into the vernacular.

*Cleanness* presupposes that vernacular translation transforms the original text, but it also assumes that this transformation might prove beneficial for the readers and listeners of the translated text. For the poet of *Cleanness*, translation should unfold as a sort of guided and measured addition. Through its translation of Latin into Middle English alliterative verse, *Cleanness* expands not only the potential audience of these biblical episodes, retold for an audience of unlearned readers and listeners, but also the range of effects, feelings, and teachings that these episodes are meant to convey. By assembling this particular collection of biblical *exempla*, the poet of *Cleanness* argues for the potential benefits of this practice, demonstrating that through a discerning alteration of details a translator can direct readers and listeners towards an orthodox consumption of Scripture.

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<sup>5</sup> Eleanor Johnson, “Horrible Visions of the Host: A Meditation on Genre,” *Exemplaria* 27, no. 1–2 (2015): 150–66.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Monica Brzezinski Potkay, “‘Cleanness’ on the Question of Images,” *Viator* 26 (January 1995): 181–193; Arthur Bahr, “Finding the Forms of Cleanness,” *Studies in Philology* 110, no. 3 (2013): 459–81.

Transformed and expanded, the narratives contained in the poem are meant to afford its audience a multiplicity of edifying beliefs, precepts, and doctrines.<sup>7</sup>

Through a “clean” translation, the original text can grow in relevance and in meaning. For this reason, the virtue of “Cleanness” enables the poem *Cleanness* to accept such a wide variety of potential critical interpretations. Thanks to this deliberately expansive vernacular translation, the “Cleanness” praised by the poet encompasses sexual constraint and the idolatrous desecration of vessels; orthodox reverence towards the Eucharist and the discernment of God’s design; proper interpretation of a text and the thoughtfulness of the vernacular translation that enables it. The poem is criticized for the vagueness of its subject matter; but I sense that perhaps we should start reconsidering it from the standpoint of its deliberate semantic comprehensiveness. For all the intolerance and raging condemnation that is paraded in its pages, and for all the genuine fear of divine retribution that the poet tries to instill in its readers, I maintain that *Cleanness* ultimately aspires to be welcoming and inclusive when it comes to how we interpret it.

As a defense of vernacular translation, and as a prescriptive text about how one might produce a potentially beneficial translation from Scripture, *Cleanness* intervenes in one of the most heated debates of its time. Around the time when *Cleanness* was presumably written, between 1380 and 1400, the practice of vernacular translation from Scripture was of course subjected to a fervent

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to its expansive vernacular translation, *Cleanness* encourages and facilitates the fourfold exegesis of Scripture that served as a cornerstone of Christian orthodoxy well into the late Middle Ages. The poet’s translations impart a memorable vividness to the historical events supposedly recorded in the Old Testament—the literal sense; hint at the truths that should be discerned beyond the superficial meaning of selected passages—the allegorical sense; prescribe behaviors deemed righteous—the tropological sense; illustrate theological tenets on God’s relationship with humankind—the anagogical sense. For an introduction to the fourfold exegesis of Scripture, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture. Volume 1*, ed. Mark Sebanc (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998). For the theological arguments articulated in *Cleanness*, see for instance Monica Brzezinski, “Conscience and Covenant: The Sermon Structure of ‘Cleanness,’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 89, no. 2 (April 1990): 166–80. David Wallace, “Cleanness and the Terms of Terror,” in *Text & Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch (New York: Whitston, 1991), 93–104; Lawrence M. Clopper, “The God of the ‘Gawain-Poet,’” *Modern Philology* 94, no. 1 (1996): 1–18; Nicholas Watson, “The Gawain-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (D. S. Brewer, 1997), 293–313.

debate in the churches, convents, and universities of England.<sup>8</sup> The great popularity of the so-called Wycliffite Bible—the first complete translation of the Bible into English—was met with rising apprehension by ecclesiastical authorities, who felt that an increased and unmediated access to Scripture on the part of unlearned laypeople would lead to the spread of heterodoxy and anticlericalism.<sup>9</sup> In the first decade of the 15th century, this apprehension would culminate in the Oxford Debate on vernacular translation and, few years later, in the Constitutions proclaimed by the archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Arundel. While the Oxford Debate served to consolidate the arguments that had been advanced either in favor or against vernacular translation, Arundel's Constitutions explicitly forbade this practice in any written form, thus retroactively attacking the legitimacy of a work like *Cleanness*—where vernacular translations from the Vulgate account for at least three fifths of the text. Accordingly, this chapter proposes that *Cleanness* acknowledges this contemporary debate on vernacular translation, and that it even serves as a coherent and conscious intervention in it.

I should stress that *Cleanness* defended vernacular translation while embracing this orthodox perspective, and that it did so at a time when ecclesiastical authorities had not yet made up their minds about the potential threat of translating Scripture. In other words, we should not confuse the linguistic and exegetical inclusiveness of *Cleanness* with any sort of doctrinal or political progressivism. *Cleanness* remains as conservative—and as intolerant—as its critics have found it to be. In fact, I believe that the poem advocates vernacular translation not simply as a way to expand the audience and the effectiveness of Scripture, but as a means to control how Scripture is consumed. *Cleanness*

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<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to the Oxford Debate on Translation and Arundel's Constitutions, see Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (1995): 822–64.

<sup>9</sup> See Wim François, *Vernacular Bible and Religious Reform in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Era*, ed. August den Hollander (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2017).

welcomes and includes a plurality of interpretations while underscoring that this plurality should always be kept within established boundaries.

As I will explain in what follows, these boundaries constitute one of the poet's main preoccupations. Although the poem embraces translation and the transformation that it entails, it also warns against its risks. Besides defending the potentially beneficial implications of this practice, *Cleanness* aims at prescribing a correct, "clean" way of translating Scripture. Indeed, the tone of the poem often comes across as conspicuously prescriptive. From the start, the virtue of "Cleanness" is presented as a quality that demands great efforts. As I will argue, the poet presents the virtue of "Cleanness" as a sort of measured attitude towards the options and decisions faced by a translator. *Cleanness* prescribes a methodology based on measure and balance: One should add, expand, and transform the original text, but never beyond the boundaries of what should be deemed "clean." All in all, the poem argues that the virtue of "Cleanness" can be found somewhere between expansion and constraint; between the additions that allow the text to speak to a broader audience and the limitations of what the text itself allows and intends to achieve. The difficulty of "Cleanness" corresponds to that of maintaining a balance between the two.

More specifically, *Cleanness* seems invested in establishing two particular boundaries for what should be deemed admissible in the translation of Scripture. First, the poem is concerned with preserving both the historical and the spiritual meaning of the biblical passages that it relates. *Cleanness* ultimately argues that these two senses can coexist; but it also envisions a sort of tension between the two. Put differently, the poem suggests that if the translator pays too much attention to the historical details of the narrative—and if these details are expanded without moderation—the spiritual sense might become harder to perceive, or it might even get silenced or lost. So, the first boundary concerns the tension that the poem perceives between historical and spiritual sense. Second, the poem warns against the addition of details that might be deemed unorthodox. From this

standpoint, the virtue of “Cleanness” alludes to a kind of theological and intellectual purity. The poem asks translators to concentrate on the transmission of God’s message, without contaminating it with extraneous ideas that might lead a reader towards the dangers of heterodoxy.

To convey this defense of vernacular translation and these prescriptions surrounding its practice, the poem resorts to figures. These figures are embedded in the biblical episodes related in the poem; they are caused by the expansions and additions that the poet incorporates in their translation. In other words, the poet experiments with scriptural translation to offer an argument about scriptural translation. From a formal and methodological standpoint, therefore, *Cleanness* constitutes a remarkably effective example of how late medieval devotional poets resorted to figures in order to develop and convey literary theories. Even more strikingly, the figures of *Cleanness* are often used to comment directly on their own creation; the arguments that they develop concern precisely the choices that have led to their presence in the text.

In what follows, I will examine how *Cleanness* expresses its defense of vernacular translations—and its warnings against the transgression of doctrinal boundaries that these translations might involve—through the numerous figures of consumption that punctuate the biblical episodes retold in it. Even though the poem openly draws attention to its own composition and to the role of mediator fulfilled by its speaker, the core of its argument on the “Cleanness” of vernacular translation is not expressed through these extradiegetic asides, but through its choice and treatment of scriptural passages. As a consequence, I will start by demonstrating how the two evangelical allusions that frame the body of *Cleanness*—the Beatitude of the “clean of heart” and the “Parable of the Wedding Feast” (Matt. 22:1-4; Luke 14:16-24)—serve to indicate the poem’s preoccupation with the way that Scripture reaches its audience.

## I. THE SUMPTUOUS BANQUET OF SCRIPTURE

### THE POET'S DANGEROUS TASK

As the product of vernacular translation, *Cleanness* reflects on its own creation and on its own author. Indeed, the poem signals this concern by repeatedly drawing attention to itself. From the start, the poem asks its audience to consider it as an object of mediation, and to pay attention to the role of translator and mediator played by the poet. *Cleanness* places at its center a fictional but coherent “poetic identity”:<sup>10</sup> a first-person narrator that seems especially eager to comment on this selection of biblical sources.

The fiction of this studious scholar of Scripture, who repeatedly claims the “authority to interpret God’s meanings,”<sup>11</sup> directs the reader’s attention towards the fact that the selected episodes similarly feature exemplary interpreters. This perspective establishes a virtually uninterrupted tradition that connects the first patriarchs of the Old Testament—Abraham, Noah, and Lot—with the Christian Church of the present day. By consenting to interpret scriptural passages, the poet becomes an influential mediator in the setting of an inescapable screen. The decisions made while selecting and retelling these biblical episodes ultimately determine how—and if—the warnings contained in them will be received by the audience. In part, the poet becomes a guardian at the threshold of interpretation, entitled to determine the criteria that allow some Christians to approach the message conveyed by *Cleanness*. But, in part, this empowerment entails more trouble than privilege. Its grave implications are in fact evoked in the first few lines of the poem, when the poet describes the intimidating task of praising “clannesse.”

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<sup>10</sup> A. C. Spearing, “Poetic Identity,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (D. S. Brewer, 1997), 35–51.

<sup>11</sup> A. C. Spearing, “Narration in the Pearl Poet,” in *Textual Subjectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Clannesse whoso kyndly cowþe comende,  
And rekken vp alle the resounz þat ho by riȝt askez,  
Fayre formez myȝt he finde in forþering his speche,  
And in þe contraré kark and combraunce huge.

Whoever could properly praise Cleanness | and list in detail all the reasons  
that she rightly demands | might find beautiful forms in supporting his  
speech, | and in the contrary trouble and great difficulty.

*Cleanness*, 1-4

The aspiration to praise “Clannesse [...] kyndly” entails complying with what the virtue herself, here personified through the feminine pronoun “ho,” rightly “askez” from the speaker. The personification turns “Clannesse” into an exacting ruler, and the composer of *Cleanness* into a subordinate. Hidden behind the indefinite pronoun “whoso,” the narrator is almost threatened by these lines, where the scope of the poetical undertaking expands. In particular, *Cleanness* is not presented as a finished piece of writing, but as an endless hypothetical exercise, only potentially fulfilled by the two auxiliaries “cowþe” and “myȝt.” Even more disquietingly, this imposing effort can result in two diametrically different outcomes: on the one hand “Clannesse” itself, which virtually coincides with the “Fayre formez” translated in the work and in the beneficial “forþering” of its “speche,”; on the other, its menacing “contraré,” marked by “kark and combraunce huge.” Thus, the opening quatrain of *Cleanness* zeroes in on its author, faced with daunting challenges and responsible for either a beatific vision or a catastrophic fall.

The incipit of *Cleanness* invites the audience to acknowledge the magnitude of the task that awaits the poet. The following lines clarify the reasons that make this endeavor so challenging: The poet should be deemed responsible for whether the readers and listeners of the poem will be allowed to approach the contemplation of the word of God. The homiletic theme of *Cleanness*, the eighth beatitude, is introduced in a way that underlines the importance of scriptural contemplation.

‘Þe hapel clene of his hert hapenez ful fayre,  
For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a leue chere’

‘The man clean in his heart has a splendid fortune, | for he shall look upon  
our Lord with a beloved face’

*Cleanness, 27-28*

In this translation, the Middle English poet has mostly preserved the syntax and diction of the Vulgate—“*Beati mundo corde quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt*” (Matt. 5:8). Nevertheless, the main verb of the second versicle, “*videbunt*,” has been amplified through the addition of a prepositional phrase, “with a leue chere,” which could refer either to God or to the blessed man. Therefore, this ambiguous interpolation turns the potentially unilateral “*videbunt*” of the Latin version into a reciprocal “*lok[ing]*,” shared and determined by the two subjects involved; it denotes a relationship, rather than a sensation. Moreover, the Middle English noun “*chere*” means ‘face’; but it can also denote a ‘manner, bearing, behavior’ and even a ‘frame of mind, state of feeling.’<sup>12</sup> Through this translation of the Beatitude, the poet stresses that the subject of *Cleanness* corresponds to the manner that we approach the contemplation of God, and to the relationship that we establish and maintain as we do so. In patristic writing, the eighth beatitude was customarily read as a blessing reserved for those who could perceive the presence of God in Scripture; as Gregory stated in his *Moralia*, “In his Scripture we look, as it were, upon his face.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to this, the text of the beatitude itself is introduced because the poet recalls what Matthew himself recalls—“*Me mynez on one amonge oþer, as Maþew recorderz*” (‘it reminds me of one [Beatitude] among the others, as Matthew remembers,’ 25). On this occasion, the verb of the subordinate clause, “*recorden*,” serves as a synonym for “*mynen*,” ‘to come to the mind’; but it can also mean both ‘to commit to memory’ and ‘to set down

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<sup>12</sup> “*Chere*.” *Middle English Compendium* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> PL, LXXV, 1142 D, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*. This passage is discussed in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture. Volume 2*, ed. E. M. Macierowski (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

in writing’— precisely what the speaker of *Cleanness* is doing at this point. The poet “recordez” what Matthew “recordez”; as a consequence, in a sort of mnemonic *mise en abyme*, the outset of the poem emphasizes and multiplies the acts of receiving, understanding, and transmitting the Word of God, comparing the task of the evangelist to that of the poet. Thus, this allusion underlines that, though in itself “ful clere” (‘very clear,’ 26), Jesus’ actual “speche” has reached the reader only through an inescapable screen of endless “record[ing]” and human interpretation, whereby *Cleanness* aggrandizes the role of the poet as an interpreter and as a mediator. In other words, by choosing the eighth beatitude as the theme of the composition, the poet asserts that *Cleanness* deals with the way one approaches Scripture.

#### THE RICHEST MEAL

The first quatrain of the poem and the introduction of the eighth beatitude clarify that, as a product of translation, *Cleanness* intends to direct the attention of the audience towards the translator—the poet whose mediation allows one to gain access to the word of God. Having established this theme, the poem instructs the reader on how it will convey its arguments and precepts concerning translation. Put differently, now that it has declared its subject, *Cleanness* must explain how this subject will be treated—what figures will be deployed by the poet as the argument develops. *Cleanness* provides this explanation through a figurative slip: From the figure of the face of God, drawn from the eighth beatitude, the poem proceeds to a different figure customarily used in patristic writing: the banquet of Scripture. In particular, the poet chooses to frame the three scriptural episodes that comprise the poem with an adaptation of an evangelical parable, the “Parable of the Wedding Feast” recounted in Matthew (22:1-4) and Luke (14:16-24). In this tale, a rich man prepares a sumptuous feast for the wedding of his son; he invites many people, some of whom refuse his invitation.

‘For my boles and my borez arn bayted and slayne,  
 And my fedde foulez fatted with slaȝt,  
 My polyle þat is penne-fed and partrykez boþe,  
 Wyth scheldez of wylde swyn, swanez and cronez,  
 Al is ropeled and rosted ryȝt to þe sete;  
 Comez cof to my corte, er hit colde worþe.’

Since my bulls and my boars are fattened and slain, | and my [well] fed fowls  
 are fattened for [the] slaughter, | my poultry, which is fed in a pen, and also  
 the partridges, | [together] with shields of wild swine, swans and cranes, |  
 everything is seared and roasted, straight for the banquet — [lit.: sitting] come  
 quickly to my court, before it gets cold.’

*Cleanness*, 55-60

Later, at the feast, the rich man discovers that one of the guests is not wearing clothes that befit the  
 occasion; instead of a festive attire, he is wearing tattered pants and shoes that have holes in them.

Forþy hyȝ not to heuen in haterez totorne,  
 Ne in þe harlatez hod, and handez vnwaschen.  
 For what vrbly habel þat hyȝ honour haldez  
 Wolde lyke if a ladde com lyberly attyred,  
 When he were sette solempnely in a sete ryche,  
 Abof dukez on dece, with dayntys serued?  
 Þen þe harlot with haste helded to þe table,  
 With rent cokrez at þe kne and his clutte traschez,  
 And his tabarde totorne, and his totez oute,

Accordingly [one] does not rise to heaven in tattered clothing, | nor with the  
 hood of a beggar, and hands unwashed. Since what earthly nobleman who  
 possesses high honor | would like it [if] a badly attired churl came [to him] |  
 while he was sitting above dukes, on a dais, served with delicacies? | When  
 the beggar with haste leaned towards the table, | with leggings torn at the  
 knees, and his patched rags, | and his tattered tabard, and his toes [sticking]  
 out.

*Cleanness*, 34-41

Horrified by this vision, the rich man severely punishes the poorly clothed guest. In the *Glossa  
 Ordinaria*, the feast was regarded as a figure for the “mens[a] Scripturarum” (‘banquet of

Scriptures’),<sup>14</sup> which a Christian should approach with reverence and decorum. In other words, all Scripture was compared to a large and appetizing supper—one in which every participant felt at constant risk of being soon kicked out. The poet deploys this narrative to illustrate the subject of the poem. He explains that “Clannesse” corresponds to the quality of the clothing worn by the guests who wish to consume the word of God, and he emphasizes how harshly the “man ryche” (*wealthy man*, 51) scolds, banishes and imprisons “[a] þral [...] vnþryuandely cloped” (‘a serf, worthlessly clothed,’ 135). The many details that the poet adds to the dry narrative related by Luke and Mark underline both the unpreparedness of the unworthy guest and the abundance of the meal that he could have consumed. The poet draws attention to the undeserving attitude—the “chere”—of the person who approaches Scripture, together with the richness of Scripture itself, figured through the abundance of meat and poultry that the rich man’s servants have fattened and roasted.

The two conspicuous elements that characterize this parable—a rich meal and an undeserving guest, used as figures for the banquet of Scripture and its intended consumer—return in every biblical episode related in *Cleanness*. Within its body, the poem repeatedly returns to the constitutive elements of the “Parable of the Wedding Feast”: a banquet is prepared, a guest is deemed worthy or unworthy of consumption. The poet indulges in describing banquets, suppers, and morsels in all three of the biblical episodes selected and adapted within the composition. In what follows, I will examine two of the most conspicuous ones, both drawn from the poet’s account of Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction: Abraham’s preparation of a beef stew (619-42) and Lot’s wife’s serving of a salty sauce (817-32). Other figures, such as Belshazzar’s drunkenness (1417-1529) and the gluttony of Noah’s raven (453-69), will be analyzed in other sections of this chapter. Furthermore, a depiction of Jesus as a carver (1101-1108), at the center of the poem, and an allusion

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables* (University of California Press, 1987); Adolph Rusch of Strassburg, ed., *Biblia Latina Cum Glossa Ordinaria. Facsimile Reprint of the Editio Princeps Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 1480/81* (Brepols, 1992).

to the Eucharist (9-12), at the beginning, may also be regarded as figures for translation. Finally, several brief but compelling allusions to food might deserve closer examination in the future, since they could similarly yield new connotations when understood as figures. I am alluding, for instance, to the poisoned apple consumed during the original sin (241-44); the deceiving fruit that grows on the shores of the Dead Sea (1041-48); the famine that puts an end to the siege of Jerusalem (1193-1200); and the “sauour” (*flavor*) released by Noah’s sacrifice of clean beasts, after the Flood (505-12).

Through these figures of consumption, the poet articulates a series of propositions and precepts concerning the translation of the Word. Although *Cleanness* develops most of its argument figuratively, the theme of receiving the word of God is also treated explicitly in the biblical episodes contained in the poem. The protagonists of *Cleanness* are depicted as they receive and interpret messages from God; all their actions depend on how effectively they can consume them. Noah’s construction of the ark, before the Flood; Lot’s flight from Sodom, before its destruction; Belshazzar’s recognition of his sins, before the Fall of Babylon—all derive from a timely and adequate reception of God’s instructions and warnings. Each one of these episodes hinges on the question of how to properly understand the divine Word, even though this Word might be delivered through different means—namely, God’s own voice for Noah, two handsome angels for Lot, and the writing on the wall for Belshazzar. By juxtaposing scenes of consumption with scenes where the word of God is received or rejected, the poet of *Cleanness* establishes a system of figurative correspondences that enable its audience to understand its argument about vernacular translation. The meal is the word of God, and the way it is served and consumed corresponds to the way it is translated and offered to its readers and listeners.

In articulating this equivalence, *Cleanness* also alludes to one of the main contexts in which vernacular translation was routinely practiced, and to the genre which inspired its form and structure:

preaching.<sup>15</sup> Translating and explaining the word of God to an audience that could barely understand Latin constituted one of the main responsibilities of a preacher. *Cleanness* highlights the importance of this task by equating it with the other grave responsibility that behooved priests—the dispensation of the Eucharist. Indeed, although the virtue of “Cleanness” is certainly related to the orthodox reverence due to the mystery of transubstantiation and to the holiness of the consecrated host,<sup>16</sup> I maintain that, for the most part, *Cleanness* deploys the Eucharist as another figure for the vernacular translation of Scripture.

This apparent subordination of the Eucharist to the consumption of Scripture might come across as unorthodox, but it is supported by the patristic tradition; moreover, it seems well consistent with the poet’s intention: to draw attention to the importance of vernacular translation and to the implications of how it is performed. We find an example of this figurative treatment of the Eucharist in the initial section of the poem, where the poet hints at the moment of transubstantiation by describing “renkez of relygioun” who “hondel [...] and vsen” Christ’s “aune body.”

For wonder wroth is þe Wy3 þat wro3t alle þinges  
Wyth þe freke þat in fylþe fol3es Hym after—  
As renkez of relygioun þat reden and syngen,

And aprochen to Hys presens, and pretez arn called;  
Thay teen vnto His temple and temen to Hymselfen,  
Reken with reuerence þay rychen His auter,  
Þay hondel þer His aune body and vsen hit boþe.

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<sup>15</sup> For an introduction to preaching in 14<sup>th</sup>-century England, see Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Basil Blackwell, 1960). For its importance in relation to *Cleanness*, see Doris E. Kittendorf, “Cleaness and the Fourteenth-Century Artes Praedicandi,” *Michigan Academician* 11 (1976): 319–30.

<sup>16</sup> See Johnson, “Horrific Visions.”

Since He who generated all things is extraordinarily angry | with the person  
who in filth follows after Him—such as men of religion, who read and sing, |  
and approach to His presence, and are called priests; | they come unto His  
temple and give allegiance to [God] Himself, upright with reverence they  
reach His altar, [and] there they handle His own body, and consume it too.

*Cleanness*, 5-11

But this description is introduced only as a figure for the occupation that most matters to the poet in this context, and that is expressed through the defining relative pronoun “þat”: “reden and syngen” Scripture. Since the compositional process of *Cleanness* largely corresponds to “red[ing]” stories from the Bible and “syng[ing]” them in verse, these two activities would arguably expand on the poetical “speche” of the opening stanza. Furthermore, a string of kinetic verbs connects this “speche” with the aforementioned Eucharistic “hondel[ing]”: “fol3e[n],” “aprochen,” “teen,” and “rychen.” Consequently, at least in this section, the poet of *Cleanness* concentrates more on the moment of “nearing” the Host, which evokes one’s approach to the banquet of Scripture, than on that of its consumption. Thus, here as in the subsequent “Parable of the Wedding Feast,” the reader should sense the anxiety of approaching—rather than the Eucharist—the “mensa Scripturarum” of the biblical episodes, which the poet has treated like Christ’s “aune body.”

By relating the virtue of “Cleanness” to the sacrament of the Eucharist and to the predication of preachers, the poem reminds its audience of one of the main contexts in which vernacular translation should have been deemed not only beneficial, but inevitable. This initial condemnation of the bad “renkez of relygioun” should not be understood as a rejection of all the preaching that relies on translation, but as an acknowledgement of the grave responsibilities that it entails. Indeed, the figure of the Eucharist as a form of scriptural translation is developed again in the central section of the poem, where the poet introduces a barely veiled allusion to the evangelical episode of the Supper at Emmaus.

For whatso He towched also tyd tourned to hele,  
 Wel clanner þen any crafte cowþe devyse.  
 So hende watz His hondelyng vche ordure hit schonied,  
 And þe gropyng so goud of God and Man boþe,  
 Þat for fetys of His fyngeres fonded He neuer  
 Nauþer to cout ne to kerue with knyf ne wyth egge;  
 Forþy brek He þe bred blades wythouten,  
 For hit ferde freloker in fete in His fayre honde,  
 Displayed more pryuyly when He hit part schulde,  
 Þenne alle þe toles of Tolowse moʒt tyʒt hit to kerue.

(Since whatever He touched immediately turned to [being] healthy, | far cleaner than any skill could describe. | So skillful was his handling that it rejected all filth, | and the sense of touch so good, [proper] of both God and Man, | that because of the neatness of His fingers He never busied Himself | either with cutting or with carving with knife or with edge; | therefore he broke the bread without blades, | since it reacted more excellently, in fact, in His fair hand; | [it] displayed more clearly when he would divide it, | than all the tools of Toulouse, might they intend to carve it.

*Cleanness*, 1099-1108

As the supreme example of “Cleanness,” this portrait of Jesus reflects the salvific function of his incarnation and his sacrifice, and the renewed understanding of Scripture enabled by them. The Middle English translation underlines these connotations. In these lines, the poet introduces terms, like “hondelyng” and “gropyng,” usually reserved for meticulous manual probings and the “feeling or examining of wounds.” These verbs, derived from the vocabulary of medieval surgery,<sup>17</sup> suggest that Jesus’ incisions, like those practiced by a surgeon, are meant to “hele”—in the same way that his incarnation healed humanity from Adam’s original sin. Moreover, the slicing seems to cure an interpretive sickness, akin to the blindness that confounded the disciples at Emmaus. Through a subtle personification, the loaf held by Jesus becomes his most conspicuous patient, not only by animatedly reacting to his touch, “ferd[ing] freloker,” but also by “[d]isplay[ing] more pryuyly” all its mysteries—like a properly translated passage. One single action—“to kerue”—fulfills two purposes:

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<sup>17</sup> Jeremy J. Citrome, “Medicine as Metaphor in the Middle English ‘Cleanness,’” *The Chaucer Review* 35, no. 3 (2001): 260–80.

healing from the original sin and displaying Scripture. Finally, by alluding to the praised “toles” of “Tolowse”—a paradigm of human technology at the time—the poet underlines that, although Jesus’ ability “to kerue” lies beyond the reach of mortal virtue, humans still can, and should, aspire to repeat his model; crafting their earthly translations in the same way that they manufacture sharp blades. Thus, the poet enriches this evangelical allusion with details that prompt the audience to regard it as a figure for a scriptural translation that can grant one a spiritual healing, in sharp contrast with the gross mishandling of the host performed by the “renkez of relygioun.”

#### ANTITHETICAL APPROACHES: CLEANNESSE AND CARNALITAS

In its opening section, *Cleanness* tells us that its subject matter corresponds to the way that the poet translates Scripture into the vernacular, and that the poem intends to develop an argument about this subject by deploying figures of consumption. At the same time, the poem introduces us to one of its main rhetorical and argumentative tendencies—namely, its tendency to articulate binaries. From its start, the poem invites us to think about the “contraré” of what it praises; the virtue of “Cleanness” can offer one “Fayre formez,” but its opposite pushes one towards ruin. The guest at the banquet of Scripture can either consume the sumptuous meal offered by the host or expect to be harshly rejected. The preachers who mishandle Scripture go against the positive model offered by Christ. These dichotomies allow the poem to advance its argument—to present the virtue of “Cleanness” as one of measure and balance. The body of the poem insists on such contrasts; it repeatedly places a positive model of translation against a negative one.

This series of contrasts implicitly extends to the virtue of “Cleanness” itself. Although the poem never mentions it openly, the measured consumption that is praised in its biblical episodes evokes a specific “contraré”: the sin of gluttony. Indeed, the three main characters who appear in the biblical episodes of *Cleanness*—Noah, Lot, Belshazzar—were all customarily cited as examples of gluttony in the penitential manuals of the late Middle Ages. If “Cleanness” in translation corresponds

to an acceptance of moderation and boundaries, gluttony can easily be used to describe its opposite: an immoderate ingestion of those literal details that might distract one from the understanding of the spiritual sense; or an unwarranted appetite for extraneous and unorthodox ideas. This treatment of gluttony would not have come across as unusual; in patristic writing, a misleading foregrounding of the literal sense over the spiritual one could be defined as “carnalitas.”

The opposition between “Cleanness” and “carnalitas”—or gluttony—underlies the biblical episodes related in *Cleanness*. By insisting on this contrast, the poet can commend those practices of translation that should be regarded as beneficial and warn the audience against those that might compromise the reception of God’s word. This approach is illustrated in a passage that appears in the first third of the poem, as *Cleanness* reaches the conclusion of its account of the Flood. The poet tells us that, at the end of the cataclysm, Noah decided to send out a raven to scout the land surrounding the ark, to find a dry patch of land to disembark. This small episode does not appear in the text of the Vulgate translated by the poet—a fact that is underlined through the peculiarly anthropomorphic characterization of the raven himself.

Penne wafte he vpon his wyndowe, and wysed þeroute  
 A message fro þat meyny hem moldez to seche:  
 Þat watz þe rauē so ronk, þat rebel watz euer;  
 He watz colored as þe cole, corbyal vntrue.  
 And he fongez to þe flyȝt and fannez on þe wyndez,  
 Halez hyȝe vpon hyȝt to herken tyȝyngez.  
 He croukez for comfort when carayne he fyndez  
 Kast vp on a clyffe þer costese lay drye;  
 He hade þe smelle of þe smach and smoltes þeder sone,  
 Fallez on þe foule flesch and fyllez his wombe,  
 And sone ȝederly forȝete ȝisterday steuen,  
 How þe cheuetayn hym charged þat þe chyst ȝemed.  
 Þe rauē raykez hym forth, þat reches ful lyttel  
 How alle fodez þer fare, ellez he fynde mete;  
 Bot þe burne bynne borde þat bod to hys come  
 Banned hym ful bytterly with bestes alle samen.

Then he turned up onto his window, and dispatched outside | a messenger  
 from that household to find lands [for] them: | that was the raven, so proud  
 that [he] was invariably rebellious; | he [had the] color of charcoal, [that]  
 deceitful raven. | And he takes [lit: sets to the] flight, and flaps on the winds,  
 | rises up to a high [position] to listen to reports. | He croaks for delight  
 when he finds a carcass | flung up on a cliff where the coasts lie dry; | he has  
 [lit.: had] a whiff of the taste and soon escapes thither, | falls onto the foul  
 flesh, and fills his womb, | and soon readily forgets the voice [from] the day  
 before: [lit.: yesterday] | how the commander, who tended the ark, instructed  
 him. | The raven rushes [lit.: betakes himself] forth, [he] who cares very little  
 | [about] how all [those] creatures fare there, provided that he finds food; |  
 but the man on board, who waited for his return, | banned him very harshly,  
 [together] with all kindred beasts.

*Cleanness*, 453-68

Briefly mentioned in Genesis (7:6-7), the raven was often chosen for analogous narrative expansions in late medieval accounts of the Flood. Moreover, many versions echoed *Cleanness* in justifying the animal's escape, reported in the Bible, with its discovery of carrion.<sup>18</sup> But these four quatrains—in themselves an amplified version of two biblical verses—seem especially devised to evoke the “carnalitas” for which the poet should be blamed in this circumstance. Here the poet could be blamed for the addition of a spurious episode and for the unwarranted expansion of literal details that seem to add little to the spiritual meaning of the passage. Like the poet, the bird should serve as a “message,” who “seche” the “moldez” of Scripture in order to “herken tyþynggez,” edifying teachings and truths, that might be delivered back to the “meyny,” the community assembled. Yet, the raven is soon lured by the “smelle of þe smach,” and pursues this distraction until, having “fyll[e] his wombe,” sinfully “forȝete ȝisterday steuen.” Consequently, if the “steuen” corresponds to the text of Scripture, which the poet is supposed to deliver to the audience, then the “fyll[ing]” of the “wombe” would represent the distracting addition of this episode; by fattening with details the

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<sup>18</sup> See Murdoch, Brian. *The Medieval Popular Bible. Expansions of Genesis in the Middle Ages*. D. S. Brewer, 2003.

surface of the literal sense, it separates both audience and translator from the true comprehension of the spiritual sense.

## II. CONTRASTING CUISINES

To recapitulate, the framing of *Cleanness* establishes the subject of the poem and the system of figurative correspondences through which it intends to convey its argument about translation. The unfolding of the poem articulates this argument by offering variations on the basic figure of the banquet and its guests. In other words, *Cleanness* repeatedly returns to episodes and circumstances that mirror and replicate each other; within these analogous settings, slight variations are deployed to indicate methodological variations in one's approach to translation. The central episode related in the poem, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, rests upon two parallel episodes where two characters receive visits from celestial visitors. In the first instance, God pays a visit to Abraham under the guise of three men. In the second, two angels pay a visit to Lot and his wife. These episodes serve as figures of vernacular translation in that the characters who appear in them are valued according to their prowess as interpreters of God's messages. So, to facilitate the illustration of this interpretive dichotomy, the poet introduces these contrasting figures within the context of a single scriptural episode. Besides, to underline their juxtaposition, *Cleanness* associates these images to the conduct of very different characters. Both these episodes unfold as miraculous visitations, ascribable to the ancient motif of *theoxenia*: the hospitable welcoming of a deity on the part of a human host, frequently followed by an adequate banquet. Of course, by incorporating these parallel instances of *theoxenia*, *Cleanness* looks back to the ambivalent reception of guests related in the "Parable of the Wedding Feast," and to the scriptural and Eucharistic connotations which I have identified in its introduction. Confronted with apparition of the divine message, Abraham's and Lot's wife seem to adopt two contrasting techniques, indicated by the two extended figures which I will

analyze in this section. So, their respective encounters with divinity culminate in two dramatically divergent outcomes, whose accounts open and close the second section of *Cleanness*.

### ABRAHAM'S SPIRITUAL STEW

The two episodes unfold similarly: In the first part of each episode, a character encounters and responds to a manifestation of divinity; in the second part, the preparation of a meal serves as a figure of how this response can be rendered in translation. The first episode, based on Genesis 18:1-8, begins when Abraham is visited by three men, whom he promptly identifies as God.

Penne watz he war on þe waye of wlonk Wyȝez þrynne;  
If Þay wer farande and fre and fayre to beholde  
Hit is eþe to leue by þe last ende.  
For þe lede þat þer laye þe leuez anvnder,  
When he hade of Hem syȝt he hyȝez bylyue,  
And as to God þe goodmon gos Hem agaynez  
And haylsed Hem in onhede, and sayde: 'Hende Lorde,  
Ȝf euer Þy mon vpon molde merit disserued ...

Then he was aware of three handsome men on the path; | whether they were comely and gracious and fair to behold | it is easy to ascertain by [considering] the final outcome. | For the person who lay there, under the leaves, | rose rapidly when he had sight of Them; | and the righteous man went [lit.: goes] towards Them as [if] towards God, | and greeted Them as a unity, and said: 'Noble Lord, | if ever your man in the world deserved a reward ...

*Cleanness*, 606-613

According to Christian commentators, Abraham's prompt recognition of this divine vision attested to his extraordinary "clean[ness] of heart." In particular, this cleanness enabled him to identify "the Trinity" long before the time of its revelation through Christ's incarnation.<sup>19</sup> Consistently, the text of the Vulgate relates that, although Abraham was initially startled by *plural* visitors, "tres viri stantes prope eum" ("three men standing in front of him"), he used a *singular* vocative to greet the apparition:

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<sup>19</sup> See Mark Sheridan, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Genesis 12-50* (InterVarsity Press, 2002).

“Domine [...] ne transeas servuum tuum” (‘Lord, do not pass over your servant,’ *Gen.* 18:2-3). After this salutation, the Latin version alternates between plural verb forms, such as “lauate pedes vestros, et requiescite” (‘wash your feet, and rest yourselves,’ *ibid.* 18:4), and singular subjects, particularly “Dominus” (‘Lord,’ *ibid.*). So, the text of the Vulgate alludes to Abraham’s prescient recognition of the Trinity.

The translation that appears in *Cleanness* underlines Abraham’s precognition through amplification. On the one hand, the poet invites the reader to mentally “beholde” the concrete presence of these “Wyȝez þrynne.” For instance, this number is emphasized by means of a close triple alliteration, lacking in unstressed syllables and underlined by a polysyndeton: “farande and fre and fayre.” These three redundant adjectives contain not only three initial fricatives (**f**), but also three medial liquids (**r**) and three final vowels (**e**). Thus, a triple alliteration, a triple consonance, and a triple assonance are deployed to evoke the concrete presence of three guests, establishing the setting for Abraham’s virtuous recognition of God’s complex ontology. So, *Cleanness* stresses the miraculous quality of this prescient recognition by emphasizing Abraham’s distinct perception of three separate men. This emphasis is especially conveyed by the several plural signifiers which were deliberately added to the text of the Vulgate. The aforementioned triple alliteration, for instance, corresponds to the predicate of a conditional clause that does not appear in the Latin version (“If þay wer...”); through this addition, the Middle English poet increases the presence of plural terms, adding an extra pronoun (“þay”) and an extra verb (“wer”). In fact, the number of deictics which refer to the three visitors is doubled in *Cleanness*: from the two of the Latin verse (“quos,” “eorum”) to the four found in these lines—“Þay,” used once, and “Hem,” repeated three times. As a consequence, together with the triple consonance of “**f**,” “**r**,” and “**e**,” the triple repetition of “Hem” seems to translate the mental image of these “Wyȝez þrynne” into a pictorial image, perceived by the reader: the triple appearance of three identical graphemes on the surface of the page. But *Cleanness* amplifies the

concreteness of this sensory perception—the “Wyȝez þryne”—only to highlight the spiritual recognition beyond it—the Trinity. In particular, the poet amplifies the *Vulgate* with two phrases which specifically underline the incongruity between these superficial signs and their deeper theological meaning: “as to God” and “in onhede.” Thus, the translation offered by *Cleanness* educates its audience about the contrast between the “syȝt” of these handsome visitors and the revelation of the spiritual sense that resides in “þe last ende,” beyond the letter of the text. Here the poem transforms the text of the vulgate in order to facilitate an orthodox interpretation of the episode.

The figure that follows serves as the theoretical counterpart to the principle of translation that the poet has just exemplified: a transformation that displays the spiritual meaning of the text. Like Abraham’s recognition of the Trinity, this extended alimentary figure also resulted from the amplification of a simpler biblical account. In the Latin version, the patriarch’s swift preparation of a banquet covers only three verses; in *Cleanness*, it extends over twenty-four lines, for a total of six quatrains.

Penne orppedly into his hous he hyȝed to Saré,  
 Commaunded hir to be cof and quyk at þis oneȝ:  
 ‘Þre mettez of mele menge and ma kakeȝ;  
 Vnder askez ful hote happe hem byliue;  
 Quyl I fete sumquat fat, þou þe fyr bete,  
 Prestly at þis ilke poynte sum polment to make.’  
 He cached to his covhous and a calf bryngeȝ,  
 Ðat watz tender and not toȝe, bed tyrué of þe hyde,  
 And sayde to his seruaunt þat he hit seþe faste;  
 [...]  
 Clechez to a clene cloþe and kesteȝ on þe grene,  
 Þrwe þryftyly þeron þo þre þerue kakeȝ,  
 And bryngeȝ butter wythal and by þe bred setteȝ;  
 Mete messeȝ of mylke he merkkez bytwene,  
 Sythen potage and polment in plater honest.

Then unhesitatingly he hastened into his house, to Sarah, | and commanded her to be prompt and quick for these ones: | 'Mix three measures of meal and make loaves; | cover them rapidly under very hot ashes; | while I find something fattened, you kindle the fire, | to make some soup swiftly, at this same instant. | He hurried to his cow shed and fetched [lit.: fetches] a calf, | which was tender and not difficult to chew, [and he] requested that [they] tear off the skin, | and said to his servant that he boil it fast; [...] | [he] grabs a clean cloth and casts [it] on the green field, | skillfully places [lit.: placed] on it three unleavened loaves, and brings butter as well and sets it by the bread; [in] between he places suitable servings of milk, | then stew and soup in a proper platter.

*Cleanness*, 623-646

Although the vernacular poet uses no less than eleven terms to underline the hurriedness of Abraham's movements and instructions ("orppedly," "cof and quyk," "byliue," etc.), the actual arrangement of the meal strikes us for its deliberate meticulousness; this incongruity seems to produce the effect of a temporal deceleration, which accords with the thoroughness demanded from the translator. Besides, unlike the Vulgate, the Middle English translation foregrounds the exact number of loaves baked by Sarah—in all likelihood a further reference to the Trinity—by opening the corresponding line with a reference to these "[p]re mettez of mele," and by repeating, ten lines later, that these measures yielded precisely "þre þerue kakez." The attention to this numerical detail confirms the consistency between the two moments of this *theoxenia*; the banquet matches the recognition, and in fact serves as an illustration for its lessons and warnings: among these, the ontological complexity of the Trinitarian God.

But *Cleanness* especially departs from its source in defining the specific kind of dish that the patriarch offered to the visitors. The Latin text simply tells us that Abraham picked a "vitulum tenerrimum and optimum" ('particularly succulent and excellent calf'), which a servant then "festinavit et coxit" ('killed and cooked'), and whose cooked meat, served to the guests, was still identified with the name of the live animal—a "vitulum quem coxerat" ('calf that he had cooked,' *Gen.* 18:7-8). Now, in the *theoxenia* of *Cleanness*, Abraham does not limit himself to killing and cooking

a bovine; rather, he explicitly “bed” that his servant first “tyrue of þe [animal’s] hyde,” and then “seþe” it. Both actions, tearing off the skin and boiling the meat, are devised to expressly transform the appearance of the calf. Indeed, at the conclusion of this process, the meal is not dished out as an identifiable “vitulum,” as in the Latin, but as a soupy stew: “potage and polment.” And yet, despite the fact that it shows little similarity to the living creature from which it derives, this food is served on an “honest” platter, which Abraham places onto a “clene” cloth. The two adjectives suggest that this transformation, like proper scriptural translation, reveals the true meaning of the original text, and that it abides by “clannesse,” not “carnalitas.” The skinning of the calf displays what lies under the visible surface, recalling the figure of Jesus slicing the bread which appears at the center of the poem; the boiling, on the other hand, changes the condition of the meat, perhaps making it more palatable for the audience. In this figure, therefore, Abraham corresponds to a “clean” translator of Scripture, who receives the Word of God with the intention of deriving from it salvific teachings and warnings. Moreover, these conclusions are meant to enlighten not only the interpreter, but also a wider audience—like the public of a poem, or the congregation who heeds the “red[ing] and syng[ing]” of “prestez.”

Although a contemporary reader may find them abstruse, the figures deployed by the poet of *Cleanness* in this circumstance allude to precedents that appeared in several exegetical texts. Certainly, the “tyru[ing] of þe hyde” and the “seþ[ing]” of the bovine recall not only Abraham’s recognition—with the neglect of the visible surface, or “hyde,” in favor of the spiritual truth hidden underneath; but also the two evangelical miracles of Emmaus and Cana—with the slicing of both the bread and the calf, and the change in color and consistency of both water and raw meat. These two episodes of the Gospel were customarily associated with the interpretation of the Old Testament in patristic

writing.<sup>20</sup> Besides, the skinning and the boiling of an animal had already been compared with the uncovering and altering involved in the process of allegorical reading. Both processes are, for instance, treated as figures in the homilies of Origen. On the one hand, the theologian argued that

the priest who removes the hide “of the calf” [...] and pulls away the skin with which its limbs are covered is the one who removes the veil of the letter from the word of God and uncovers its interior parts which are members of spiritual understanding.<sup>21</sup>

On the other, he unfavorably described improper attempts “to mix with the words of Scripture another material which could water it down in the cooking,” and in particular the practice of boiling, or “cook[ing] with water” (*Peri Pascha*).<sup>22</sup> To clarify, the two metaphors referred to the positive and negative aspects of allegorical interpretation. The skinning implied that this method alone allows one to access true “spiritual understanding,” whereas the boiling represented the hazard of deploying it to introduce ideas that were deemed extraneous to Scripture.

## THE WIFE’S UNORTHODOX SAUCE

The risks involved in reading Scripture allegorically are evoked but ultimately averted by the virtuous *theoxenia* modeled through Abraham in this first passage. However, Origen’s disapproval of the misinterpretation resulting from “mix[ing] with [...] Scripture another material” resonates with the second *theoxenia* that I intend to consider here. As I have mentioned, this episode too consists of two parts: a recognition, in this case Lot’s identification of two angels, followed by an extended food figure, corresponding to his and his wife’s preparation of a saucy supper. Both sections are characterized by an even more preponderant use of amplification on the part of the vernacular poet.

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Thomas P. Scheck, ed., *Jerome. Commentary on Matthew* (Catholic University of America Press, 2008); Daniel Keating and Matthew Levering, eds., *Aquinas. Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 1-5*. (Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Gary Wayne Barkley, ed., *Origen. Homilies on Leviticus, 1-16* (Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Robert J. Daly, ed., *Origen. Treatise on the Passover and Dialogue of Origen With Heraclides and His Fellow Bishops on the Father, the Son, and the Soul* (Paulist Press, 1992).

As he stared into þe strete þer stout men played,  
 He syȝe þer swey in asent swete men tweyne;  
 Bolde burnez wer þay boþe with berdles chynnez,  
 Ryol rollande fax to raw sylk lyke,  
 Of ble as þe brere-flour where so þe bare scheweod.  
 Ful clene watz þe countenance of her cler yȝen:  
 Wlonk whit watz her wede and wel hit hem semed.  
 Of alle feturez ful fyn and faultless boþe;  
 Watz non aucly in ouþer, for aungels hit wern,  
 And þat þe ȝep vnderȝede þat in þe ȝate syttez;  
 He ros vp ful radly and ran hem to mete [...]

As he stared into the street where bold men enjoyed themselves, | he noticed  
 two people move in sweet harmony there; | they were both excellent men  
 with beardless chins, | majestic coiling hair, similar to raw silk, | [and] in  
 complexion like the briar rose flower, wherever [their] bare skin was visible. |  
 The appearance of their clear eyes was very bright: | their clothing was  
 handsomely white and it became them well. | [They were] both fully delicate  
 and faultless in all [their] features; | [there was] nothing amiss in either [of  
 them] because they were angels, | and the alert one who sat [lit.: sits] at the  
 gateway understood that; | he stood up very readily and ran to meet them.

*Cleanness*, 787-97

Compared with Abraham's immediate identification of the Trinity, Lot's "vnderȝe[nding]" proceeds  
 from the observation of "alle feturez": "berdles chynnez," "rollande fax," "ble," "yȝen," and "wede."  
 The poet of *Cleanness* adds these profuse physical details to the terse account of the Vulgate, which  
 mentions none of them. In the Latin version—which in fact closely resembles Abraham's earlier  
*theoxenia*—Lot merely "vid[er]t eos, surrexit, et ivi obviam eis" ("saw them, stood up, and went towards  
 them," *Gen.* 19:1). In the vernacular translation, instead, he "stared" at every aspect of their  
 "countenance" before reaching a truthful conclusion—"for aungels hit wern." Unlike Abraham, Lot  
 seems to value, and rely upon, material and sensory appearances for his recognition. He does not  
 neglect literal details as insufficient; rather, he inspects them thoroughly, expecting to find a divine  
 revelation in plain sight. So, the poet is adopting a slightly different strategy here; the translation  
 alters the text in order to make the literal sense more conspicuous, but without displaying the

spiritual sense that lies beyond it. While Abraham's recognition coincides with a neglect of the letter, Lot's recognition is founded on its appreciation and thorough inspection.

The close juxtaposition of the two strategies that are deployed for the translation of these two scenes—the former revealing the spiritual sense, the latter insisting on historical details—can be justified by considering the particular function of each episode. According to Christian commentators, Abraham's vision prefigured the mystery of God's tripartite essence; a high theological truth, which one would have been allowed to access only through the sophisticated means of allegorical interpretation. Lot, on the other hand, simply interacted with two divine ambassadors, who were primarily meant to manifest the extent of God's control over human history, and particularly in regard to Sodom and Gomorrah; a sense that could be comprehended, for the most part, by reading literally. In other words, by amplifying these adjacent biblical passages with details that recall either one or the other exegetical method, the poet indicates the relative need for both. As a consequence, *Cleanness* seems to maintain that proper translation does not exclusively conform to either of the two approaches, but that it depends on one's general consideration for Scripture and its manifold purposes—for instance, as theological doctrine and as historical document.

The conclusion of this *theoxenia* supports this proposition with its figurative reversal. In contrast to the previous episode, the food figure that follows the proper recognition of the divine visitor does not accord with it; rather, it seems to directly oppose this positive model of translation.

Loth þenne ful ly3tly lokez hym aboute,  
And his men amonestes mete for to dy3t:  
'Bot þenkkez on hit be þrefte what þynk so 3e make,  
For wyth no sour ne no salt seruez hym neuer.'  
Bot 3et I wene þat þe wyf hit wroth to dyspyt,  
And sayde softely to hirsself: 'Þis vnsaueré hyne  
Louez no salt in her sauce; 3et hit no skyl were  
þat oþer burne be boutte, þa3 boþe be nyse.'

Penne ho saurez with salt her seuez vchone,  
Agayne þe bone of þe burne þat hit forboden hade,  
And als ho scelt hem in scorne þat wel her skyl knewen.  
Why watz ho, wrech, so wod? Ho wrathed oure Lorde.

Then Lot looks around himself very nimbly, | and exhorts his men to prepare a meal: | 'But mind that, whatever you make, it [should] be appropriate, | because you [should] never serve them [anything] with either sour [flavor] or salt.' | But yet I believe that it [i.e., Lot's exhortation] turned the wife to spite, | and [she] said quietly to herself: 'These unsavory servants | approve of no salt in their sauce; yet it would not be reasonable | that other people be without [it] even though they are both fastidious.' | Then she seasoned [lit.: seasons ] with salt each of their sauces, | against the request of the man that had forbidden it, | and so she drove them away in scorn, [the angels] who knew well her reasoning. | Why was she so foolish, the wretch? She angered our Lord.

*Cleanness*, 817-28

The opposition between this food figure and the preceding recognition stems from the disagreement between Lot and his wife, who adopt radically different stances in their own interactions with the heavenly visitors. Thus, the conflict between husband and wife mirrors a clash between contrasting strategies for translation, which result in diametrically different outcomes. To render this diametrical difference, *Cleanness* completely alters the account of the Vulgate. After having specified how Lot “lyȝtly lokez hym aboute,” a gesture that corroborates his reliance on the observation of exterior details, the poet attributes to him an injunction that was not derived from the Bible. While in the Vulgate the patriarch merely “fecit convivium, et coxit azyma,” so that the guests “comederunt” (‘prepared a banquet, and cooked unleavened food, and they ate,’ *Gen.* 19:3), here, in the account of *Cleanness*, Lot overtly demands that this “þrefte” supper, cooked for them, contain “no sour ne no salt.” This instruction triggers the exposition of the apocryphal narrative that follows, which, as O. F. Emerson has demonstrated, the poet possibly fabricated from the combination of two “legends” of

Jewish provenance, originally included in the collection of the *Genesis Rabba*.<sup>23</sup> In particular, the first of these accounts only clarified that, since this incident occurred during Passover, the bread baked for the visitors would “contain neither yeast nor salt, for even the latter causes slight fermentation.” Conversely, the second account elaborated a contrary narrative, according to which Lot asked his wife to offer salt to the guests, “in token of hospitality”; the woman refused, and consequently God turned her into a pillar of salt.<sup>24</sup>

*Cleanness* inherits elements from both antecedents, including the prohibition of leaven and the etiology surrounding the pillar, but it alters the wife’s function and motive; rather than withholding salt as an expression of her inhospitableness, she adds some for the sake of taste. Consequently, instead of “ly3tly lok[ing]” at the two guests, as Lot does, she concentrates exclusively on an absent object: the missing “salt in her sauce.” Similarly, a distracting craving for “salt” prevents Lot’s wife from listening to her immediate surroundings, as her speaking “softly to herself” suggests, and instead urges her to pay exclusive attention to her own faulty “skyl.” This deceptive rational argument, mentioned twice in these lines, is based on what she expects to perceive—the future consumption of the “sauce”—rather than on what she might presently recognize—Lot’s explicit injunctions and the heavenly “feteuz” denoting the two angels. This fixation with the “salt” that the “vnsaueré” guests are lacking recalls the unwarranted appetite of *carnalitas*, and the lack of “Cleanness” that this appetite might provoke. A translator who seeks to season the letter of Scripture with details that do not belong to it—precisely what the poet of *Cleanness* is doing by interpolating these two Jewish legends—risks leaving aside the task of conveying God’s message and allowing heterodox ideas to seep through the text.

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<sup>23</sup> Oliver Farrar Emerson, “A Note on the M. E. ‘Cleanness,’” *The Modern Language Review* 10, no. 3 (July 1915): 373–75.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

In other words, the wife has not avoided the risk outlined by Origen in the second figure quoted above, where he deplored the hazards of allegory; she has “mix[ed] with the words of Scripture another material which [...] water[ed] it down in the cooking.” Here *Cleanness* introduces an analogous metaphor, where the addition of “salt” denotes an unwarranted appetite for details that are not found in Scripture, and the “skyl” encouraging it represents the extraneous ideas that contaminate God’s word and deafen its true voice. The first part of this episode suggests that the success of Lot’s *theoxenia*, unlike Abraham’s, depends on the attentive appreciation of what can be presently perceived in Scripture—the literal meaning. By contrast, the wife’s anticipation for an absent, future gratification entirely undermines her own “vnderſte[nding]” of the message. From her compromised perspective, these carriers of the Word are not revealed as heavenly messengers, but merely as “vnsaueré hyne,” characterized only by the “savour” that a carnal reader might seek in vain. Like the figure of the cooked and boiled calf, the figure of “salt” as a dangerous extraneous idea was supported by patristic and evangelical antecedents. In the Gospel of Mark, for instance, Jesus warns the apostles against the “leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” clarifying that by “leaven” he means the heterodox doctrines of the two sects.<sup>25</sup> In the sauce served to the two angels, the wife’s salt would produce the same effects as this evangelical leaven—seemingly inconspicuous at first, it would ultimately alter the flavor of the whole dish.

The identification of this “salt” with the extraneous additions that may push the audience away from an orthodox understanding of Scripture explains the poet’s description of the wife’s transgression and final punishment. Regarding the transgression, an etymological *adnominatio* connects the verb that denotes it—“sauerez” the visitors’ sauce—with the adjective that encapsulates the reasons behind her gluttonous mistranslation—considering them “vnsaueré.” This rhetorical

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<sup>25</sup> This passage is brilliantly discussed in the opening chapter of David Nirenberg, *Aesthetic Theology and Its Enemies: Judaism in Christian Painting, Poetry, and Politics* (Brandeis University Press, 2015).

connection underlines how her gesture strives to overturn the circumstances which she wrongly perceives; in other words, the addition of “salt,” equivalent to “mix[ing]” with Scripture an extraneous argument, depends on her misguided appetite for what Scripture allegedly lacks. Furthermore, in the Dantean contrapasso of her final punishment, the wife’s own body is turned into a figure for the consequences of this mistranslation.

Loth and þo luly-whit, his lefly two de3ter,  
 Ay fol3ed here face, bifore her boþe y3en;  
 Bot þe balleful burde, þat neuer bode keped,  
 Blusched byhynden her bak þat bale for to herkken.  
 Hit watz lusty Lothes wyf þat ouer her lyfte schulder  
 Ones ho bluschet to þe bur3e, bot bod ho no lenger  
 Pat ho nas stadde a stiffe ston, a stalworth image,  
 Al so salt as ani se—and so ho 3et standez.  
 [...]  
 Þe þre ledez þerin lent, Loth and his de3ter;  
 For his make watz myst, þat on þe mount lenged  
 In a stonen statue þat salt sauor habbes,  
 For two fautes þat þe fol watz founde in mistrayþe:  
 On, ho serued at þe soper salt bifore Dry3tyn,  
 And syþen, ho blusched hir bihynde, þa3 hir forboden were;  
 For on ho standes a ston, and salt for þat oþer,  
 And alle lyst on hir lik þat arn on launde bestes.

Lot and those lily-white [women,] his two beloved daughters, | always followed the [direction that they were] facing [placed] in front of both their eyes; | but the malevolent lady, who never obeyed [any] commandment, | gazed behind her back to pay attention to that destruction. | It was Lot’s wife, the lustful, who over her left shoulder | gazed once towards the city, but she waited for no longer | than she was set [into] rigid stone, an immovable figure, entirely salty, as much as any sea—and so she stands even now. [...]  
 The three people remained in it [i.e., the city of Zoar] Lot and his daughters; | since his wife was missing, [she] who stayed on the mountain, | in [the shape of] a statue made of stone that has the taste of salt, | for two wrongdoings [for] which the sinner was found in lack of faith: | first, she served salt at the supper, before the Lord, | and afterward she gazed behind her, although [it] was forbidden to her; | for one she stands [as] a stone, and [made of] salt for the other, | and all the beasts that are in [that] land wish to lick at her [body].

*Cleanness, 977-1000*

The single instant of the wife’s metamorphosis—a laconic “versa est” in the Vulgate—is not only dilated into a whole quatrain, but further expanded through two subsequent enjambments (“ouer her lyfte schulder | Ones ho bluschet”; “bod ho no lenger | Pat ho nas stadde”). These suspensions, a relatively infrequent feature for the poem, intensify the wife’s misdirected anticipation and prolong her desire of witnessing “pat bale”; cravings which recall her previous concentration on the missing “salt.” In other words, as her unmoving mortal figure illustrates, she has permanently turned her senses and understanding—her “face”—away from divine truth, and “bihynde,” towards the deadly but enticing distractions offered by heterodox ideas and the mundane world: the “sauor” of “salt” and the “blusch[ing]” of Sodom’s spectacular doom. Thus, as unmovable as a “ston” and as appetizing as “salt,” the pillar comes to represent the fate of preachers who translate Scripture “uncleanly,” denying the vision of God to themselves and to their audience.

### III. BELSHAZZAR’S GLUTTONS

*Cleanness* highlights the threat of heterodoxy and of *carnalitas* associated with an uncontrolled and contaminated rendering or transformation of the scriptural text. Nevertheless, it is through this contamination and through this expansion that the poem conveys its message. Paradoxically, the composer of *Cleanness* must resort to altering the letter of Scripture to denounce the dangers of translating it “uncleanly.” As I have mentioned, the poem’s opening lines describe the interpretation of the Word fulfilled by poets and priests as a strenuous task, which might result in “kark and combraunce huge” to boot. Allegedly, while the virtue of “clannesse,” or proper translation, might allow one to be welcomed by the the Beatitude of “oure Lorde,” its contrary excludes one as a sinner, unendingly transfixed, like Lot’s wife, on flawed reasoning and damning appetites. Consequently, the wife’s gluttonous addition of salt exemplifies a warning against extraneous details and ideas—Origen’s “mix[ing] with [...] Scripture.” But this same passage, altered and amplified like

many others in *Cleanness*, could also be cited to prove how frequently the vernacular poet commits precisely her sin—changing the text of the Vulgate by introducing the enticing distractions of apocryphal, at times unique, narrative details. Moreover—just like Lot’s wife—*Cleanness* cannot avoid expanding on the spectacle of the burning cities (949-972; 1005-1048) or indulging in gruesome depictions of the Flood (361-408) and the siege of Jerusalem (1181-1268). So, in spite of its warnings against the dangers of mistranslation, *Cleanness* ultimately argues that mistranslation should be preferred to no translation at all. For the poet, scriptural translation should always be regarded as necessary, while its avoidance can only worsen the spiritual wellbeing of Christian worshippers. Therefore, the final section of *Cleanness* insists on the fact that a “clean” translation—and particularly a divinely inspired one—can help readers and listeners make sense of Scripture, even in the face of the inevitable *carnalitas* produced by texts where the spiritual meaning seems least immediately perceivable.

The last section of the poem comes across as exceptional for several reasons. Here the poet departs from the model of *theoxenia*. Rather than depicting an intimate exchange between God—or his messengers—and one or more of his patriarchs, this section revolves around two episodes in which God largely remains silent, expressing himself only through the horrendous wonders of Nebuchadnezzar’s metamorphosis into a brute beast (1671-1708) and the severed hand that leaves a threatening message on the walls of Belshazzar’s banquet hall. While God remains mostly silent, the poet concentrates on the loud, ferocious violence of historical events that might have evoked familiar sights and feelings for the 14<sup>th</sup>-century audiences of *Cleanness*: war, sieges, looting, captivity, slaughter, and hunger. The poet’s translation intensifies the goriness of these depictions but does not offer any insight into what they might mean from a spiritual standpoint. Instead, he combines and adapts the biblical passages that describe the rise and fall of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar—drawing from *Chronicles* (36:11-21), *Jeremiah* (52: 1-26), and *Daniel* (4:27-34)—into an account that highlights their

internal repetitiveness. Nebuchadnezzar's take of Jerusalem (1175-1260) mirrors Darius's (1767-1796); his fall (1325-1332) mirrors Belshazzar's (1785-1792); the seizing of the vessels (1269-1286) mirrors their misuse (1437-1500). Thus, this section of the poem concentrates on delivering historical details rather than on displaying their spiritual meaning. If anything, the poet describes a set of circumstances in which this spiritual sense seems inaccessible. God's design does not manifest itself through supernatural cataclysms such as the Flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; on the contrary, it is fulfilled through seemingly ferocious historical events and thanks to agents that seem unaware of their function. The audience of the poem is invited to pay attention to the bloodiness of these familiar tragedies—not to the potential spiritual meaning that lies beyond them.

From a figurative standpoint, the poet conveys the effects of this translation through the figure of Belshazzar's banquet. This sumptuous feast is characterized by one striking quality: it lacks food. The poet's rendition of this episode insists on everything that should surround the food—the precious silverware, the extravagant decorations, the music and revelry, and—of course—the wine; but it makes no mention of what Belshazzar's guests are actually eating. This absence becomes especially conspicuous when one compares this passage with the depiction of the fattened poultry and cattle served at the "Parable of the Wedding Feast," or with the generous supper that Abraham offers to the Trinity. I sense that, with this lack of food, the poet intends to represent the inaccessibility of the spiritual sense that lies beyond the historical events that are recounted in this section. Because the translator has devoted most of his efforts towards the amplification of these historical details, the audience is temporarily driven away from the banquet of Scripture, and for the spiritual message that God's word is meant to convey.

The inaccessibility of this spiritual meaning is corroborated by how the poet treats the description of sound in this passage. Belshazzar's feast is mainly characterized by its noises: the clatter of the silverware and the vessels, the shouts of the rowdy banqueters, the "trumpen"

(‘trumpets,’ 1402), “nakeryn noyse, notes of pypes” (‘noise of rattle-drums, notes of pipes,’ 1413) that, together with several other musical instruments (1414-16), accompany the bacchanal. The poet repeatedly contrasts this deafening noise with the silence of Belshazzar’s idols: figurines made of stick and stones that seem to mutely witness the occasion. So, while the crowd of “glotounes” hosted by the Babylonian rule is dazed by intoxicating revelry and the “[c]latering” of metal bowls, their pagan “goddess,” like the “steuen” of Scripture silenced by the forgetful raven, remain “stille euermore.”

Nov is alle þis guere geten glotounes to serue,  
 Stad in a ryche stal, and stared ful bryȝte;  
 Baltazar in a brayd: ‘Bede vus þerof!  
 Weȝe wyn in þis won! Wassayl!’ he cryes.  
 Swyfte swaynes ful swyþe swepen þertylle,  
 Kyppe kowpes in honde kynges to serue;  
 In bryȝt bollez ful bayn birlen þise oþer,  
 And vche mon for his mayster machches alone.  
 Þer watz ryngyng, on ryȝt, of ryche metalles,  
 Quen renkkes in þat ryche rok rennen hit to cache;  
 Clatering of couaclez þat kesten þo burdes  
 As sonet out of sauteray songe als myry.  
 Þen þe dotel on dece drank þat he myȝt;  
 And þenne derfly arn dressed dukez and prynces,  
 Concubines and knyȝtes; bi cause of þat merthe,  
 As vchon hade hym inhelde he haled of þe cuppe.  
 So long likked þise lordes þise lykores swete,  
 And gloryed on her falce goddes, and her grace calles,  
 Pat were of stokkes and stones, stille euermore—  
 Neuer steuen hem astel, so stoke is hor tongue.

Now all this apparatus is fetched to serve gluttons, | placed in a rich stall, and [it] shines [lit.: shone] very brightly; Belshazzar in an instant: ‘Offer [to] us from these! Bring wine into this room! Wassayl!’ he cries. | Swift attendants hasten very quickly there and back, | seize cups in [their] hands to serve kings; | [while] these others serve very eagerly in bright bowls, | and each man is paired with [lit.: for] his master alone. | There was ringing, in truth, of rich metals, | when the people in that rich castle ran to seize it — [i.e., the apparatus] | clattering of lids that those men flung | as merry as the music [that comes] out of a singing psaltery. | Then the fool on the dais drank as much as he could; [lit.: all that he might] and then promptly are assembled dukes and princes, | concubines and knights; because of that mirth, | since each had poured [for] him, he [i.e., Belshazzar] sipped from the cup. | These

lords licked these sweet liquors [for] so long, | and rejoiced in their false gods, and invoked [lit.: invoke] their grace, | [of those] who were [made] of sticks and stones, always silent—no voice ever escaped [from] them, so stuck is their tongue.

*Cleanness*, 1505-1524

Like the intoxication brought about by wine, which induces Belshazzar to the sacrilegious defilement of the vessels, the sonic distraction of the “ryngyng [...] metalles” and “[d]latering [...] couaclez,” opposed to the “stoke [...] tongue” that identifies the dumb idols, seems to distance these “glotounes”—a term absent from the Vulgate—from proper understanding. Contrasted with the liturgical “sonet out of sauteray,” and stressed by the customary alliteration of the Middle English verse, this deafening soundscape apparently fulfills the same function as amplification of historical details practiced by the poet. Accordingly, both in this passage and in the preamble to the poem, Scripture is implicitly likened to “guere,” or “gere”: a vessel containing spiritual truth and defiled by sinful mediators.<sup>26</sup> In the opening lines of *Cleanness*, these mediators are identified with unworthy “renkez of religioun,” who “sulpen” both the Eucharist and the Word; here, they might correspond to these “glotounes,” who hold the vessels of Scripture not to consume its divinely inspired teachings, but to enjoy the noisy and inebriating pleasures offered by its sensational narratives.

Nevertheless, despite the deafening qualities of a narrative filled with literal details, *Cleanness* ultimately argues that the display of the spiritual meaning, and the “clean” conveyance of God’s word, can coexist with—and compensate for—a translation that mainly fleshes out the literal. Indeed, at the center of this episode the poet places an explicit depiction of translation. Following the account of the Vulgate, Belshazzar’s banquet is interrupted by a threatening vision: that of a severed hand that writes three foreign words on the wall of the hall: the Hebrew injunctions “*Mane, Techal,*

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed analysis of the significance of these vessels within the poem, see Charlotte Morse, “The Image of the Vessel in *Cleanness*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 1971.

*Phares*” (1727). Belshazzar summons the scholars of his court, but none of them can make out the writing. Finally, Belshazzar’s wife suggests that he should ask the wise man who once assisted his father Nebuchadnezzar: the prophet Daniel. So, Daniel translates the three words on the wall, and his voice—which temporarily replaces the voice of the poet, as if remedying to his gluttonous translation—offers a contrast to Belshazzar’s defilement of the vessels and to the clattering of literal details represented by his feast.

Daniel’s translation of the writing on the wall serves as the poet’s last positive example of vernacular translation. It serves as the antithesis to Belshazzar’s negative example—in the same way that Abraham served as an antithesis to Lot’s wife, Christ as an antithesis to the evil priests of the opening, and the dove as an antithesis to the raven. Yet, it also serves as the ultimate argument in defense of vernacular translation. For Belshazzar and his “glotounes,” the consumption of God’s miraculous words is made possible thanks to the intervention of the prophet. Therefore, the poem juxtaposes a negative representation of the noise and confusion provoked by the vernacular alteration of the letter with its exact opposite; a virtuous translation dispensed by a biblical figure who parallels the poet. Consequently, *Cleanness* suggests that the banquet of the Word does not necessarily oppose the noise of narrative detail. On the contrary, as Daniel’s speech and the subsequent fulfillment of its prophecy exemplify, the proper translation of Scripture can even compensate for the most “carnal” and gluttonous literalism. Thus, Daniel’s translation of God’s words provides this last section of the poem with the spiritual meaning that it was otherwise lacking. By doing so, it sanctions the need for a “clean” translation of Scripture, where the historical details are placed within the context of a scriptural interpretation of the events. Once again, the virtue of “Cleanness” comes across as a measured approach, a balance between the amplification of literal details and the need for spiritual enlightenment, opposed to the immoderate consumption represented by gluttony.

## CONCLUSION

*Cleanness* ultimately embraces vernacular translation. It understands and claims that the expansion of historical and concrete details—the expansion that characterizes Belshazzar’s feast and the divinely inspired translation of the writing on the wall—should not be understood as alternatives, but as elements that can complement each other. The framing of *Cleanness* anticipates a binary and forces us into a system of oppositions, underlining the narrowness of the doorway that leads one into the banquet of Scripture. The form of *Cleanness*, however, suggests that a translator can embrace different and even antithetical approaches, enlarging the effects and the potential audience of the biblical text. For this reason, in spite of the uncompromising orthodoxy that pervades some of its claims, the doctrinal stance of *Cleanness* could ultimately be regarded as surprisingly generous and comprehensive.

# GLOSSING GLOTOUN: THE LOSSES OF VERNACULAR TRANSLATION IN *PIERS PLOWMAN*

Like the anonymous *Cleanness*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is a work of translation. In the pages of this widely read allegorical vision, which circulated in three different versions in the last decades of the XIV century,<sup>1</sup> a dreamer named Will seeks answers to some of the most pressing questions that would trouble a socially-minded Christian in late medieval England: How can society truly abide by the moral tenets of Christianity? How can its members ensure that everyone will contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of the community? And how can all receive a fair share of the material and spiritual goods they need in order to live righteously and pursue salvation? In short—how does one “do well” in the world? These questions orient Will's search for “Treuthe” and determine his exchanges with the many allegorical personifications whom he encounters during his journeys: figures like “Holy Church,” “Conscience,” “Hunger,” “Patience,” and “Faith.” In the three parts of the poem—roughly devoted to the secular world, the self, and the Christian community—Will interrogates these personifications to try and piece together a set of principles that should govern his—and everybody else's—spiritual and material life. This piecing together entails a process

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<sup>1</sup>For a comprehensive account of the complex editing history of *Piers Plowman*, see Charlotte Brewer, *Editing Piers Plowman: The Evolution of the Text* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For the dating of the three versions, see Ralph Hanna, “Emendations to a 1993 ‘Vita de Ne’erdowel,’” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 14 (January 1, 2000): 185–98. In this chapter I will concentrate exclusively on Langland's third revision, known as the C-text. This choice depends on several reasons. First, this third revision shows greater concern for the poet's social and intellectual responsibilities, encapsulated in his addition of the so-called “apologia pro vita sua.” Second, the third revision alone includes the linguistic argument on “relacion rect and indirect,” which reveals much of Langland's attitude towards the linguistic specificity of Latin. Finally, as Jill Mann has shown, the third revision plays up the poem's references to eating and drinking, expanding the role and the significance of gluttony; see Jill Mann, “Eating and Drinking in ‘Piers Plowman,’” *Essays and Studies* 32 (1979): 26–43. For a survey on the peculiarities of the C-text, see E. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1949). All citations are from William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: Liverpool University Press, 2008), and followed by my own paraphrases.

of constant adaptation and reformulation—of translation *lato sensu*—which is indeed reflected in the complex manuscript history of the poem.<sup>2</sup> The knowledge that Will receives from his interlocutors, and which largely coincides with the one imparted by scriptural and patristic authorities, cannot be assimilated and deployed as it is. Rather, it must be related to the subject and to the community that receives it and embodied in the *hic et nunc* of its specific circumstances. In the poem’s own words, it must be translated into “kynde knowyng”: made natural, intuitive, and personal—or, more precisely, turned into knowledge that is akin to the subject who consumes it.<sup>3</sup>

As I will discuss in this chapter, Langland’s translation of received knowledge into “kynde knowyng” depends on an even more essential form of translation, ubiquitous yet seemingly unacknowledged in the pages of *Piers Plowman*: the translation of Latin texts into Will’s own vernacular. All the knowledge that is taught and debated in *Piers Plowman* originates in Latin: the words and phrases that the poet constantly weaves into his alliterative lines; the excerpts that the dreamer hears from his interlocutors; and the maxims that he cites to support or dispute their claims. Translating these fragments of knowledge into English allows the poet to apply them to his lived experience. Nonetheless, Langland persistently undermines the validity of vernacular translation, either by subordinating his translations to the direct perusal of his Latin sources, or by avoiding translations altogether. In what follows, I will argue that Langland regards vernacular translation not

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<sup>2</sup> For an emblematic example of this constant adaptation, as reflected in the poem’s manuscript history, see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The Politics of Book Production in the Douce Piers Plowman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> The transition from revealed knowledge to “kynde knowyng” is detailed in John Lawlor, *Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1962). In his well-established commentary to the poem, A. V. C. Schmidt glosses “kynde knowyng” as “natural, instinctive knowledge”; see William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London; New York: Longman, 1995). I derive my understanding of “kynde knowyng” from Eleanor Johnson, who highlights the “semantic plasticity” of the Middle English “kynde” and renders it as “natural, inborn, and familiar”; see Eleanor Johnson, “Piers Plowman and Social Likeness: How to Know God ‘Kyndely,’” in *Staging Contemplation* (University of Chicago Press, 2018). For a similar approach to the meaning of “kynde knowyng” as a search within the self, see Mary Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman* (Evanston [Ill.]: Northwestern University Press, 1973). For a contextualization of this concept among medieval theories of cognition, see Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

only as a necessity but as a loss. While clerks like him are faced with the necessity of translating Latin texts into the vernacular, to make their privileged knowledge available to all, translation itself entails an inevitable loss of morality and truth, caused by the fundamental linguistic differences between Latin and English. In the third revision of the poem, Langland figures this loss as a kind of gluttony: a dissipation of meaning by which one wastes a resource that should be shared among all members of society. The figure of gluttony ultimately clarifies Langland's rationale for deploying or inhibiting vernacular translation. For Langland, vernacular translation should be offered and consumed only when there is an actual need for it—a hunger for it—lest it turns detrimental and sinful.

## I. TRANSLATION AS NECESSITY

To examine Langland's ambivalent attitude towards vernacular translation, I will start by examining the few circumstances in which *Piers Plowman* openly describes this practice. Although translation and translators pervade the poem, Langland ostensibly refrains from commenting on them at length; a hesitation that might have derived from their controversial association with the Wycliffite heterodoxy.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the rare instances in which Langland depicts translation may encapsulate his approach. In *Piers Plowman*, translation is treated as a difficult yet indispensable practice. Translation allows the unlearned to understand and implement the precepts of law, religion, and philosophy. Langland adopts the verb “construen” to highlight this positive function of vernacular translation; a word which, in the late XIV century, still retained the polysemy of the Latin “construere,” meaning both “to connect words” and “to build.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For more background on these controversial associations, see the examination of the Oxford Translation Debate and Thomas Arundel's Constitutions in Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change” and in Vincent Gillespie, “Vernacular Theology,” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> “Construen.” *Middle English Compendium*.

## THE RESPONSIBILITY OF “CONSTRUEN”

For Langland, vernacular translation can be deemed constructive when it proves instrumental to a broader and more conspicuous kind of translation: the translation of received knowledge into a “kynde knowyng” that the dreamer can understand, assimilate, and practice. This translation *lato sensu* greatly affects the overall logic and structure of the poem and justifies many of its jarring argumentative twists. Langland translates knowledge into “kynde knowyng” by constantly investigating how knowledge “works”; how these precepts actually operate once they are applied to the concrete and specific contexts familiar to Langland and to his readers. A Latin dictum cited by the personification of *Liberum Arbitrium*, or “Free Will,” well encapsulates this translation of received knowledge into “works.”

“*Beatus*,” saith seynt Bernard, “*qui scripturas legit*  
*Et verba vertit in opera* emforth his power.”

“*Blessed*,” says saint Bernard, “[is the one] *who reads Scriptures | And translates*  
*words into deeds* to the extent of his power.”

PP.XVI.222-23

Will’s quest in *Piers Plowman* unfolds between the two coordinate clauses that identify Bernard’s “Beatus.” In his journeys to find “Treuthe” and “Dowel,” Will must reflect on how the words revealed to him—the “scripturas” that he “legit”—can be translated into those righteous actions that may redeem him and the rest of society. But the phrase “vertit in opera,” ‘translates into works,’ refers to Langland’s poetics as well: namely, to his persistent effort to imagine how the knowledge he receives will work in the world which he inhabits.

This translation *lato sensu* from “verba” into “opera” depends on a less conspicuous yet perhaps more fundamental process of translation: the translation *stricto sensu* of Latin texts into the vernacular. Like Bernard’s own words and like the “scripturas” to which they allude, the fragments of

knowledge and authority that are cited in *Piers Plowman* always exist in Latin before being incorporated into Langland’s vernacular poetry—and, consequently, before they can be worked into Langland’s vernacular context. The reading of the pardon sent from Truth, a scene that serves as a narrative and thematic watershed in *Piers Plowman*, well exemplifies this dependence on vernacular translation. Received with great anticipation by a crowd of penitents, this pardon is meant to articulate a blueprint for the redemption of every member of society, and its promulgation marks the beginning of Will’s greatest spiritual quest—the one for “Dowel.” Yet, like every other textual object that appears in the poem, the pardon too has been written in Latin. As a consequence, before Will and the penitent crowd can understand, follow, and “worch[en]” its contents, these must be translated into the vernacular—precisely what an unnamed priest offers to do in the climax of this pivotal scene.

‘Peres,’ quod a prest tho, ‘thy pardon moste Y rede  
 For Y can construe vch a word and kennen hit the an Engliche.’  
 And Peres at his preyre the pardon vnfoldeth  
 And Y byhynde hem bothe byheld alle the bulle  
 In two lynes as hit lay and nat a lettre more,  
 And was ywryte ryhte thus in wisse of Treute:  
*Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam; Qui vero mala in ignem eternum.*  
 ‘Peter!’ quod the prest tho, ‘Y kan no pardon fynde  
 Bote Dowel and haue wel and god shal haue thy soule  
 And do yuele and haue euele and hope thow non othere  
 Bote he that euele lyueth euele shal ende.’

‘Piers,’ a priest then said ‘I must read your pardon | For I can construe each  
 word and tell it to you in English.’ | And Piers unfolds the pardon at his  
 prayer | And I beheld all the bull [while I was standing] behind both of them  
 | As it lay in two lines and not a letter more, | And truly [it] was written thus,  
 with Truth as a witness: | *And those who did good things will go into eternal life; |*  
*But those who [did] bad things [will go] into eternal fire.* | ‘Peter!’ the priest then  
 said, ‘I can find no pardon | But Dowel and have well and god shall have  
 your soul | And do evil and have evil and hope for nothing else | Except that  
 he that lives evil shall end evil.’

PP.IX.281-92

The unnamed priest who construes these pithy lines for the crowd follows the model of Bernard's "Beatus": He "vertit in opera" the "verba" of the pardon. In particular, the effectiveness of his translation hinges on his choice to turn a pair of disjunctive nominal clauses—"qui bona egerunt," "qui vero mala"—into a string of present imperatives and indicatives, linked by the paratactic conjunction "and" and forming a sort of loose polysyndeton. In other words, as he shifts from the Latin to the vernacular, the priest turns a general statement concerning an abstract third-person plural into a series of concrete and specific instructions directed at the audience: "Dowel and haue well." Therefore, both the diegetic and extradiegetic listeners of this speech—including Will—are prompted to "Dowel": to seek redemption by "worch[ing]" the teachings of Scripture. The priest's vernacular translation, like most translations in the text, epitomizes and allows this process, stressing the dependence of translation *lato sensu*—from abstract to concrete, from general to specific—on translation *stricto sensu*—from Latin to vernacular.

The priest uses the verb "construen" to designate the act of parsing the pardon before turning it into English. This term appears only a handful of times in the final revision of *Piers Plowman*, and it is consistently associated with labor and responsibility. In the passage quoted above, the priest places it at the center of a string of verbs that begins with the modal "moste" and pivots on the modal "can": "Thy pardon moste Y rede | For Y can construe vch a word and kennen hit the an Engliche." The pairing of these two modals—"moste" and "can"—conveys the sense of responsibility associated with vernacular translation. The priest "moste"—has a moral obligation to—peruse the document; and this obligation is dictated by the fact that he "can"—possesses the knowledge and skills that are needed to—construe the text and tell it in English. Despite the ambivalence of his attitude towards the practice of translation, Langland's commitment to this particular principle does not waver: Those who can construe Latin must do so for those who cannot, even when this task seems impossibly laborious. A brief exchange between the personification of

Active Life and that of Patience, later in the poem, illustrates this conviction. Because the practically minded *Activa Vita* “can nat construe” a Latin definition of “*Paupertas*” on his own, Patience must agree to construe it for him (‘cannot construe,’ ‘*Poverty*’). Patience admits that “propreliche to telle hit, | Al this in Engelysch, hit is ful hard” (‘it is full hard to tell all this properly in English,’).

Nevertheless, he “shall tell [him] a bit” (*PP.XVI.114-119*), since the knowledge contained in this definition of poverty would otherwise remain entirely unavailable to *Activa Vita*.

When he speaks of “construen” Latin before turning it into English, Langland stresses not only the laboriousness and responsibility associated with translation, but also the needs which it fulfills. In order to set out on their journey towards salvation, the penitents that gather to hear Truth’s pardon need to be told that the only way to be truly redeemed is to “Dowel.” In order to fully deserve God’s gift of Free Will, the unlettered Active Life needs to hear an English paraphrase of the praise of Patient Poverty—the one condition that best epitomizes one’s submission to God’s will. In these exchanges, translation is treated as the only means afforded to these allegorical and non-allegorical characters to receive the instructions and the enlightenment they need in order to become better Christians. Langland treats the knowledge conveyed by these Latin texts— and especially Scripture—as a resource that belongs to all Christians, but that can be dispensed only by those few who have devoted their lives to its study. These learned people, whom Langland generally calls “clerkes,” are supposed to supply this knowledge according to the spiritual needs of their community. Yet, as the personification of *Liberum Arbitrium* laments, clerks often prefer to withhold the wealth that they have received from God.

Y dar nat carpe of clerkes now that Cristes tresor kepe  
That pore peple by puyre riht here part myhte aske.

I dare not speak now of clerks who keep Christ's treasure | [Of] which poor people, by simple justice, might ask their share.

PP.XVII.69-70)

Similar to the material “tresor” amassed by these clergymen, scriptural knowledge should be regarded as a precious resource to which all are entitled. It belongs to Christ, and the “clerkes” who “kepe” it are in fact bound “by puyre riht” to return a fair “part” of it to everyone who “myhte aske.” *Liberum Arbitrium* is not explicitly discussing Latin literacy and vernacular translation in this passage; nonetheless, his condemnation of the clerks’ covetousness anticipates his censure of ineffective instructors and preachers, which he delivers only few lines later. He entrusts these holders of knowledge with responsibilities: to abide by the prescriptions of “gramer” (‘grammar’) when they compose their texts; to “construe kyndelyche” the works of “poetes” (‘construe properly,’ ‘poets’); to “conne” and “assoile” the intricacies of “decre” and “diuinite” (‘know,’ ‘resolve,’ ‘law,’ ‘theology’); and to “seien [...] masse” without “ouerhipp[en]” any bits of Scripture (‘say mass,’ ‘skip’). Langland underlines the consequences of their negligence. Because of bad “clerkes,” new generations lose their grasp of grammar, which is “the grounde of al.” Theologians and judges are incapable of solving problems in their disciplines, challenged by the methods of “philosophie.” Finally, since “prestes” neglect to “doen here deuer wel” (‘do their duty well’), the enlightening power of Scripture is denied not only to Christians, but also to “Sarrasynes” (‘muslims’), who are deprived of their opportunity to “be saued” by “byleu[en]” (‘believing,’ PP.XVII.108-124). All in all, Langland maintains that the people who have claimed a social position by learning, employing, and controlling texts—and particularly Latin texts—should be held responsible for administering a “tresor” of knowledge that the rest of society needs and deserves.

## THE KING'S "CONSTRUEN"

Since Latin literacy can be acquired only by a limited portion of society, vernacular translation becomes an indispensable means to share the contents of this "tresor" of knowledge with all those who need it. From this standpoint, translation in *Piers Plowman* fulfills not only a spiritual function, but also a political one, as long as it allows those in power to implement precepts and assertions drawn from Latin authorities. This is demonstrated in a scene set in Westminster and involving the "King" of *Piers Plowman*. This character, a sort of antonomasia for secular power, is introduced as an arbiter in the question of whether "Lady Mede"—an embodiment of material rewards and the subject of the first section of the poem—should be married to Falsehood or to Conscience; in other words, of whether material rewards should be used to motivate people to carry out their duties and follow social norms.<sup>6</sup> The allegorical personifications that originally debate this question cannot reach a consensus; as a consequence, they decide to travel to Westminster, so that the King may settle the dispute after having heard the advice of his counsellors, Conscience and Reason. Langland draws attention to the king's dependence on vernacular translation in the culmination of this dispute, when Reason relies on a widespread Latin aphorism to persuade the King that under his rule good deeds should be rewarded in the same way that bad deeds are punished.

'For *nullum malum* the man mette with *inpunitum*  
And bad *nullum bonum* be *irremuneratum*.  
Lat thy confessour, syre kyng, construe this in Engliche  
And yf ye worche it in werke Y wedde bothe myn handes  
The lawe shal ben a laborer and lede afelde donge  
And loue shal lede thi land as the leef lyketh.<sup>7</sup>  
Clerkes that were confessours couplede hem togederes  
To construe this clause kyndeliche what it meneth.

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<sup>6</sup> The role played by this allegorical figure in the whole poem is examined in David Benson, "The Function of Lady Meed in *Piers Plowman*," *English Studies; Amsterdam* 61, no. 1 (January 1, 1980): 193.

‘For the man requites no evil deed with unpunished | And requested [that] no good deed [should] be unrewarded. | Sir King, let your confessor construe this in English | And if you work it in works I pledge both my hands | The law shall be a laborer and carry dung to the fields | And love shall lead your land as [it] pleases your beloved person.’ | Clerks that were confessors coupled themselves together | To properly construe this clause [and] what it means.’

PP.IV.140-147

The allegorical personification of Reason does neither translate nor isolate the Latin phrases “nullum malum [...] inpunitum” and “nullum bonum [...] irremuneratum.” Rather, he folds these terms into his speech, turning them into an integral part of the alliterative line.<sup>7</sup> The alliteration emphasizes the centrality of the direct objects “malum” and “bonum,” which are matched with the subjects and verbs of the sentence: “man mette” and “bad [...] be” respectively. The meaning of this sentence and the cogency of Reason’s argument hinge on these terms. As a consequence, since the King ostensibly lacks the knowledge required to understand these words, Reason suggests that the King should turn to a learned member of his court, such as his “confessour.” Only thanks to the assistance of this mediator the King would be able to assimilate this precept and enact it in his *bic et nunc*—that is, to “worche it in werke.” Thanks to translation, the speculative knowledge of Reason can be deployed to “lede” the “land,” and the abstract precepts of the “lawe” can be used to govern the life of the single “laborer” working “afelde.” Because of its resounding political impact, vernacular translation is treated as a grave business in these lines. Reason has asked the King to consult a single “confessour”; yet multiple “clerkes,” all employed as “confessours,” respond to the call. They materialize around the two interlocutors and, having “couplede hem togederes,” join their efforts to tackle the challenge. A redundant line recounts their labor and reiterates its purpose: They “construe this clause kyndeliche,” with the intention of uncovering “what it meneth.” The adverb “kyndeliche” matters

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<sup>7</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the function of alliteration in these lines, see Johnson, “*Piers Plowman* and Social Likeness.”

greatly here. Of course, it associates this vernacular translation with the “kynde knowyng” of the dreamer’s quest; by construing it into English, the clerks aspire to make Reason’s knowledge “kynde”: natural and personal, akin to the person that will consume it. Yet, “kyndeliche” can also mean “properly,” “accurately,” “effectively.”<sup>8</sup> From this standpoint, the adverb hints at the fact that the confessors’ translation aspires to a fidelity that vernacular translation does not always guarantee. The King’s confessors choose to construe these words “kyndeliche”—but they might have chosen not to, or they might fail to do as they choose. Once again, therefore, Langland’s depiction of translation highlights the responsibility of “clerkes.” The “confesours” who hasten to assist the King and to solemnly construe Reason’s speech hold the power to render it “kyndeliche” or not. Their conduct ultimately determines whether the righteousness and cogency of Reason’s words will be retained or squandered in the kingdom of *Piers Plowman*. These learned men “kepeth the keyes” of the “coffre” (‘chest’) that holds “Cristis tresor,” and can “vnkloken hit at here lykyng” (‘unlock it at their will’), sharing or withholding the knowledge that lies therein (*PP*.XIV.54-55). In the three scenes that I have considered so far, Langland plays up the role of clerks and translators by showing how their “construen” of Latin can offer enlightenment and direction to those who lack it.

#### A CLERK’S REDDERE

The emphasis placed on these three mediators—the “prest” who interprets the pardon, the personification of “Pacience,” and the team of “confessours” at the King’s court—invites a comparison with the role of yet another mediator: the first-person “Y” who quietly witnesses, records, and reports all these exchanges. This “Y” belongs to Will, the dreamer and narrator of *Piers*

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<sup>8</sup> For the polysemy of “kynde” and “kyndeliche” in *Piers Plowman*, see Anne Middleton, “William Langland’s ‘Kynde Name’: Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England,” in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson, *The New Historicism* 8 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 15–82; Nicolette Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire*, *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature* 59 (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

*Plowman*. Historically, readers of the poem have tended to fuse the fictional identity of this character with the historical person of the author, interpreting the few facts that we learn about the dreamer as facts that the otherwise unknown “William Langland” would be disclosing about himself. The poem invites such conflation: Even though he behaves like a person in a dream, Will retains some historical and geographical specificity in discussing his surroundings, habits, and concerns.

Among the traits that define Will’s persona, his knowledge of Latin is treated somehow inconsistently, yet never entirely called into question. Some allegorical characters, like Holy Church or Dame Studie, scold him for having learned “To lyte Latyn” in his “yowthe” (‘too little Latin,’ ‘youth,’ *PP*.I.470) and “lakk[en]” him “in Latyn” (‘disparage,’ *PP*.XI.162). Nevertheless, Will also shows his familiarity with the language by citing numberless Latin quotations, sometimes accompanied by his own translations. On one occasion he even makes a display of his proficiency before two proud friars whom he meets on his way, quoting and translating from the Bible “as a clerk” (*PP*.X.20). Furthermore, during the aforementioned reading of the pardon sent from Truth, Will places himself “byhynde” the priest who is construing the Latin lines for the crowd. He himself “byheld alle the bulle,” in order to transcribe, “as hit lay and nat a lettre more,” all that “was ywryte” on it. We hear these crucial Latin lines from Will, not from the priest. His position and his function during this scene suggest that here too he is acting “as a clerk,” partaking of the privileges and responsibilities bestowed upon those who “can” and “moste” administer the knowledge transmitted through Latin.

Langland greatly expands on Will’s privileges and responsibilities in a section that appears only in the last revision of the poem, and that 20th-century critics have dubbed “the author’s apologia.”<sup>9</sup> Here Langland openly attributes to Will many of the prerogatives that he generally

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<sup>9</sup> This addition to the third revision has been analyzed in detail in Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

associates with “clerkes.” The section begins when the personifications of Conscience and Reason ask Will to justify his place in society: How does he contribute to the common good, and how does he earn a living, if he does not work in church as a clergyman, toil in the field as a laborer, or own land like an aristocrat (*PP.V.12-34*)? In his reply, Will does not start by explaining how he assists others or how he earns the food he eats; instead, he starts his apologia by describing how he learned to read Scripture.

‘When Y yong was, many yer hennes,  
My fader and my frendes foende me to scole  
Tyl Y wyste witterly what holy writ menede  
And what is beste for the body, as the boek telleth,  
And sykerost for the soule, by so Y wol conteneu;  
And foend Y nere, in fayth, seth my frendes deyede  
Lyf that me lykede not in this longe clothes.  
And yf Y be labour sholde lyuen and lyflode deseruen,  
That labour that Y lerned beste therwith lyuen Y sholde:  
*In eadem vocacione qua vocati estis, &c.’*

‘When I was young, many years ago, | My father and my friends funded me  
to [go to] school | Until I truly knew what Holy Writ meant | And what is  
best for the body, as the book says, | And safest for the soul, on condition  
that I will continue; | And I never found, in faith, since my friends died, a life  
that pleased me [when I was] not [wearing] these long robes. And if I should  
live by [my] labor and deserve a living, | I should live by means of that labor  
that I learned best: *In that same vocation in which you were called, &c.’*

*PP.V.35-43*

In these lines, Will foregrounds the opportunity to receive an education—to attend “scole”—as the fundamental biographical fact that determined his competences, his vocation, and his profession. We learn that his relatives and supporters provided for his instruction until he learned “what holy writ menede”; a phrase that refers to the proper exegesis of Scripture, but that also encompasses one’s familiarity with Latin. Through this ability, Will later learned to assemble both practical and spiritual precepts derived from the revealed Word—“what is beste for the body [...] And sykerost for the soule.” He in fact proceeds to demonstrate this ability straight away, by directing his interlocutors to

the passage in Paul's letters from which he has drawn his knowledge concerning one's "vocacio": the injunction to respond to God's call while remaining in one's established condition. This maxim is quoted directly from the Latin Vulgate, yet it has been shortened and is left untranslated. Therefore, it serves to justify Will's standing in society for two reasons: because it sanctions Will's desire to pursue his original vocation through Paul's authority; and because it proves that Will can apply the knowledge he derives from Latin to the concrete and particular circumstances of his lived experience. Will establishes the reading of Scripture, and the knowledge of Latin presupposed by this reading, as the fundamental factors that determined his vocation.

By placing emphasis on his education and on the texts that has "witterly" consumed thanks to it, Will implies that his vocation originally involved more taking than giving; instead of delivering knowledge, he was asked to accumulate it. Indeed, the first verb that appears in this autobiographical segment encapsulates this concept. Will's father and his supporters "foende" him to attend university; in other words, Will—the object, not the subject, of this first sentence—did not earn his footing by himself, but rather received it as an endowment. In the ensuing lines, Will complicates this perspective by relating how he earns a living by putting to work those tools of Latin and Scripture which he has acquired and perfected over time.

And so Y leue in London and opelond bothe;  
The lomes that Y labore with and lyflode deserue  
Is *pater-noster* and my prymer, *placebo* and *dirige*,  
And my sauter som tyme and my seuene psalmes.  
Thus Y synge for here soules of suche as me helpeth,  
And tho that fynden me my fode fouchen-saf, Y trowe,  
To be welcome when Y come other-while in a monthe.

And so I live both in London and in the country; | The tools with which I  
labor and deserve my living | Are the *pater-noster* and my primer, *placebo* and  
*dirige*, and sometimes my psalter and my seven psalms. Thus I sing for the  
souls of those who help me, | And those who find me my food grant [me], I  
am certain, | To be welcome when I come at various times in a month.

PP.V.4448

Will presents himself as a beadsman: a person who prays for the salvation of other people in exchange for charitable offerings. As a consequence, he includes books of prayers among the tools that allow him to support himself: the “prymer” and the “sauter” from which he reads when he is asked to pray for someone’s soul. But, alongside these physical objects, we find the incipits of the Latin formulas that he has memorized in order to fulfill this task: “*pater-noster*,” “*placebo*,” and “*dirige*.” These correspond to widely known prayers in the Christian liturgy, whose use—if not meaning—would have been familiar to most people in Western Europe, regardless of their level of literacy. Nevertheless, Will treats these widespread Latin idioms into implements of his particular vocation; in fact, he even suggests that his mastery of the language grants him ownership of these liturgical formulas. Will speaks as if he owned these Latin incipits; together with his books, they are bounded by first-person possessive adjectives and linked in a polysyndeton through the conjunction “and”: “and my [...] and [...] And my [...] and my.” This emphasis on the first-person possessive anticipates the centrality of the first-person accusative pronoun in the sentence that follows. Here Will reveals that he delivers his Latin formulas only to the “soules of suche as me helpeth” and to “tho that fynden me my fode.” These relative clauses revolve around the direct object “me,” the recipient of the help and food which these believers provide as a remuneration for his spiritual labor.

So, the apologia turns Latin knowledge into a good that can be exchanged: Will gives what he owns in return for what he needs. Yet, as I have demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, other sections of *Piers Plowman* clarify that the knowledge administered by clerks makes them keepers of a “tresor” that does not belong to them exclusively. Rather, these clerks have the responsibility to

make this knowledge available to any person who may want to “aske” for “here part” of it. Like the other mediators whom I have considered so far, Will “moste” help and enlighten others through the knowledge that he draws from Scripture and Latin authorities, as long as he “can” do so.

Consistently with what Langland argues in the rest of the poem, not only does Will acknowledge this position in the conclusion of the apologia, but he actually adduces it as his main argument to justify his place in society.

And also moreouer me thynketh, syre Resoun,  
Me sholde constrayne no clerke to no knaues werkes,  
For by the lawe of *Leuytyc* that oure lord ordeneyde  
Clerkes ycrouned, of kynde vnderstondynge,  
Sholde nother swynke ne swete ne swerien at enquestes  
Ne fyhte in no faumewarde ne his foe greue:  
*Non reddas malum pro malo.*

[...]

Hit bycometh for clerkes Crist for to serue  
God and good men, as here degre asketh:  
Somme to synge masses or sitten and wryten,  
Redon and reseceyuen that resoun ouhte to spene,  
And knaues vncrounede to carte and to worche.

And also moreover I think, sir Reason, | [That] one should constrain no clerk  
to a commoner's works, | For, according to the law of *Leuiticus*, our lord  
commanded that | Tonsured clerks, [people] of innate understanding, |  
Should neither toil, nor sweat, nor swear at trials, | Nor fight in the vanguard,  
nor harm their foe: | *Do not return evil for evil* [...]. | It is becoming for clerks  
to serve Christ, God, and good men, as their degree demands: | Some to sing  
masses, or to sit and write, | Advise and receive that [which] reason ought to  
spend, | And [let] untonsured commoners haul carts and toil.

PP.V.44-65

Critics have found Will's self-justification quite dubious in this circumstance, and with good reason.

The apologia has been rightly interpreted as an ironic rebuttal of the arguments typically advanced to support the excellence of “*vita contemplativa*”: a life entirely devoted to spiritual pursuits and

removed from temporal and material concerns.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Langland has been considered an advocate of either “vita mixta”—which combines spiritual and secular pursuits—or “vita activa”—engaged in labor and directly involved in the secular world. Will’s claim that all “Clerkes ycrownd” should be exempt from any sort of “swynk[en]” and “swet[en],” and on the grounds of their “kynde vnderstondynge” alone, clashes with his frequent attacks on the parasitism of the mendicant orders, and with his overall admiration for those who “w[i]nne” everybody’s sustenance by “sw[i]nken ful harde” (‘working very hard,’ *PP.I.23*). However, I find that the principle that underlies Will’s reasoning in these lines accords well with Langland’s overall stance on the responsibilities of clergymen and learned people. The “degre” of “clerkes,” the privileged position that they have acquired through their learning, “asketh” that they lend their services both to “God” and to “good men.” These services are arranged in a climax that increasingly highlights how clerks can become involved in the exercise of power and in some aspects of secular life, from the singing of mass—and the preaching that this entails—to the composition of documents and, presumably, literary works, to the advice that clerks are asked to provide to other people. These demands are based on the assumption that, since the knowledge administered by clerks does not belong exclusively to them, it must be returned to the whole community.

Indeed, the perspective advanced in this passage pivots on the concept of “return.” The Latin verb “*reddere*,” which of course means “to return,” appears in the injunction that Will cites to oppose the enlisting of clergymen.<sup>11</sup> Though it may come across as a casual choice, the word resonates across the lines that follow. Few lines later, in fact, Will describes the obligations of clerks with an English term that closely resembles “*reddere*”: the verb “redon.” This pregnant paronomasia between “*reddere*”

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<sup>10</sup> This argument was advanced, for instance, by Henry W. Wells, “The Philosophy of Piers Plowman,” *PMLA* 53, no. 2 (1938): 339–49, and S. S. Hussey, “Langland, Hilton, and the Three Lives,” *The Review of English Studies* 7, no. 26 (1956): 132–50.

<sup>11</sup> For an examination of the function of the verb *reddere* in *Piers Plowman*, see Eleanor Johnson, “Reddere and Refrain: A Meditation on Poetic Procedure in Piers Plowman,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 30 (January 1, 2016): 3–27.

and “redon” suggests that the advice provided by these learned people should be regarded as a form of “return”: the restitution of the knowledge they have obtained, now deployed for the good of the community. This undertaking is fittingly paired with a metaphorical depiction of accounting. When they “synge masses or sitten and wryten,” and when they “redon” others, these clerks “resceyuen that resoun ouhte to spene”: they ‘receive custody of what’—or ‘keep receipts for what’—should be spent by reason. In spite of its obscurity, this final image undoubtedly evokes a transaction—“resceyuen,” “spene”—and an obligation—“ouhte”; in other words, it corroborates the notion that clerks are responsible for administering a resource that they do not own and that is meant to be returned to others. Because of their learning, clerks can behave like the “confessours” who assist the King during the trial of Mede; they return the knowledge spent by “Resoun” to the ruler who is called to make a decision. Indeed, vernacular translation itself can be identified as a way to return knowledge. Through translation, clerks return Latin precepts to rulers and commoners alike, allowing others to understand and implement—in other words, “worche [...] in werke”—the knowledge that they have consumed. Ultimately, Will’s apologia consolidates Langland’s stance on the responsibility of clerks. Their knowledge of Latin grants them control over a resource that they must return to others, in order to contribute to the material and spiritual good of their community.

## II. TRANSLATION AS LOSS

So far, I have concentrated on how vernacular translation is described as a useful and often necessary practice in *Piers Plowman*. The translation of Latin precepts into English advances the dreamer’s quest for “kynde knowyng”; allows rulers and commoners to “worchen” the precepts of scriptural and patristic authorities into their everyday lives; and enables learned people to return the knowledge that they have consumed to the rest of society. Nonetheless, alongside this positive depiction of vernacular translation, *Piers Plowman* advances a diametrically different stance: one

according to which vernacular translation does not enlighten as much as it obfuscates; does not give as much as it takes away. In short, while Langland sees vernacular translation as a necessity and as an aid, he also cannot avoid regarding it as a loss. In this section I will demonstrate how the poem introduces and justifies this perspective. I will first briefly consider the bitter contrition that puts an end to Will's apologia (*PP.V.92101*); then I will examine at length how Langland treats the insurmountable linguistic differences between Latin and English, in his careful exposition of what distinguishes a "relacion rect" from an "indirect" one (*PP.III.342*).

### WILL'S LOSING BARGAINS

In spite of its praise of the social functions and responsibilities that behoove clerks like him, Will's apologia does not end on a self-congratulatory note—far from it. Indeed, in a jarring turnabout, the two personifications of Reason and Conscience eventually prompt Will to repent profusely. In particular, although Conscience openly confirms that most of Will's self-justification seems reasonable, and admits that he "can nat se this lyeth" ("cannot discern [whether] this [one] lies"), he also adds that "it semeth no sad parfitnesse in citees to begge, | But he be obediencer to prior or to mynistr" ("it seems no genuine righteousness to beg in cities, | Unless [one] is a subordinate to a prior or to a minister," *PP.V.89-91*). By itself, Conscience's retort corroborates the reading of Will's apologia as a disingenuous vindication of his "vita contemplativa." In particular, Will is not entitled to beg for food in the streets, since he is not affiliated with a monastery or a church. As keen as it may prove to be, this observation should mostly inspire Will to reconsider how he earns his bread and to regret subsisting on unsanctioned alms; at most, he may repent for having lived as a parasite. However, Will responds to this attack on his "sad parfitnesse" with disproportionate ardor, breaking into a surprisingly intense and prolonged display of contrition. Even

more remarkably, these lines do not center on his illicit begging, but on a formerly unmentioned misspending of time and resources.<sup>12</sup>

‘That is soth,’ Y saide, ‘and so Y beknowe  
That Y haue ytynt tyme and tyme mysperned;  
Ac yut Y hope, as he that ofte hath ychaffared  
And ay loste and loste and at the laste hym happed  
A bouhte suche a bargayn he was the bet euere  
And sette al his los at a leef at the laste ende,  
Suche a wynnynng hym warth thorw wyrdes of grace:  
*Simile est regnum celorum thesauro abscondito in agro.  
Mulier que inuenit dragmam.*  
So hope Y to haue of hym that is almyghty  
A gobet of his grace and bigynne a tyme  
That alle tymes of my tyme to profit shal turne.’

‘That is true,’ I said, ‘and so I recognize | That I have wasted time and  
misspent time; | But still I hope, like the one who has often bartered, | And  
always lost and lost and at last [it] happened [to] him: | He bought such a  
bargain [through which] he was better ever [after], | And set all his losses at a  
trifle at the last end, | Such a winning came [to] him through words of grace:  
| *The kingdom of heavens is similar to a treasure hidden in a field | The woman who  
found the coin.* | So I hope to have from him who is almighty | A morsel of his  
grace, and [to] begin a time | That all times of my time shall turn to profit.’

PP.V.92-101

Not only does Will’s answer to Conscience clash with the understated tone of his interlocutor’s litotes—“semeth no sad parfitnesse”; it also avoids to address the chief reason that caused him to be scolded in the first place. Rather than repenting for the hypocritical way in which he has sustained himself, Will aggrandizes and abstracts his fault, turning it into an ineluctable cycle of loss. Indeed, the moving simile of the merchant who keeps making losing trades could apply to all inveterate sinners, stuck in their habits until they attain the steadfast salvation granted by God’s grace. Instead

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<sup>12</sup> The significance of this waste of time and resources has been examined by J. A. Burrow, “Wasting Time, Wasting Words in Piers Plowman B and C,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (January 2003): 191–202. For a more comprehensive approach to Langland’s preoccupation with the waste of resources, see Eleanor Johnson, “The Poetics of Waste: Medieval English Ecocriticism,” *PMLA* 127, no. 3 (2012): 460–76.

of Will's parasitic sustenance, the image magnifies time and repetition. The word "tyme" is repeated five times in these lines, and often in constructions that underline this repetitiveness, such as the anadiplosis of "tynt tyme and tyme myspeued." Similarly, in the simile that compares Will's condition to that of a disgraced merchant, the words "loste" and "laste" are both doubled in redundant alliterative constructions, which highlight the high number of seemingly identical failures that precede an eventual success: for instance, in the polyptoton of "And ay loste and loste and at the laste." Time, repetition, and loss are only marginally related to Conscience's accusation. Perhaps Will has repeatedly wasted his time as an unlicensed beggar; yet, a fitting confession should probably highlight what he has taken from others—not what he has lost while doing so.

This seeming lack of consistency between Conscience's remark and Will's simile reveals that the actual cause of his bitter contrition lies elsewhere. The simile indicates that Will is not so much repenting for the illicit begging condemned by Conscience, as he is confessing a distinct and perhaps more profound wrongdoing. In fact, I argue that the countless losses that impoverish the merchant of this simile might stand for the endless losses that Will endures as he performs the task of vernacular translation. Will must persist in this undertaking with strenuous hope, and always pray that he will be afforded the "gobet of [God's] grace" that may "turne" the loss of translation into a "profit." This potential "wynnyng" is expressed "thorw" the "wyrdis" of two untranslated scriptural quotations (Matt. 13:44 and Luke 15:10); both passages describe characters who find hidden treasures, a "dragman" and a "thesaur[um]." These evangelical riches may represent grace itself, but they also evoke what Langland has called "Cristis tresor": the knowledge of Scripture, kept under key by the learned "clerkes" who know how to administer it.

Thus, Will's eventual "profit" will be achieved only when God's grace allows him to compose vernacular translations where the "tresor" of Latin may be found; but until then, he can foresee only "los." In other words, the simile of the losing merchant serves not only as an illustration of Will's

condition, but as a figure for translation: an endless string of exchanges that inevitably result in loss. Vernacular translation is Will's main trade; his way to turn the Latin and scriptural knowledge that he has assimilated into the "kynde knowyng" that can be understood and deployed by him and by his community. The apologia has foregrounded precisely these two concepts: Latin knowledge has shaped his vocation, and his responsibility as a clerk is to return to others the knowledge that he has consumed through Latin. His "tyme" is chiefly spent in this pursuit; if the whole pursuit proves to be a losing bargain, then his whole "tyme" has been "myspene" and "ytynt." So, while the first part of Will's apologia praises the responsibility of clerks, urged to "*reddere*" the knowledge that they retain, the conclusion suggests that this "*reddere*" may be hindered by an almost inevitable loss.

#### INSURMOUNTABLE DIFFERENCES

This loss derives from Langland's conception of Latin and English as fundamentally different languages. For Langland, the constitutive features of each language convey specific meanings that—unless God concedes "a gobet of his grace"—can never be rendered into a different language. Langland openly reflects on this semantic loss in an extended grammatical exposition that Conscience delivers to the King, and which concerns the distinction between the "relacion rect" of Latin and the "[relacion] indirect" of English. Conscience articulates this consequential distinction during the aforementioned debate on Lady Mede's place in society. To understand this exposition, it should be remembered that Langland regards "mede"—and the personification who responds to this noun—as a material reward, promised or conferred to people in order to have them fulfill a task or behave in a given way. In the debate on Lady Mede's intended role, Reason and Conscience harshly reject her usefulness, claiming that such material rewards do not inspire love for the common good, but only selfish covetousness. Moreover, they argue that "mede" is rarely deserved by those who receive it. Conscience maintains that "mede" should be set against "mercede," a different kind of reward. While "mede" designates a disproportionate remuneration, "mercede" denotes a payment

that is precisely commensurate to the service provided; in other words, “mede” refers to an uneven exchange, “mercede” to an even one.<sup>13</sup> To illustrate this contrast, Conscience relates “mede” and “mercede” to two kinds of grammatical “relacion”: “rect” and “indirect.”

Thus is mede and mercede as two maner relacions,  
Rect and indirect, reninde bothe  
On a sad and a siker semblable to hemsuluen.  
Ac adiectif and sustantif vnite asken  
And acordaunce in kynde, in case and in nombre,  
And ayther is otheres helpe—of hem cometh retribuoun,  
And that is the gyft that god gyueth to alle lele lyuynges,  
Grace of good ende and gret joye aftur:  
*Retribuere dignare, domine deus, &c.*  
Quod the kyng to Conscience, 'Knownen Y wolde ...

Thus mede and mercede are like two kinds of relationships, | Direct and indirect, both relying | On a steadfast and certain similarity to themselves. | But adjective and substantive demand unity | And agreement in gender, in case, and in number, | And either [of them] is the other's aid—from them comes recompense, | And that is the gift that god gives to all [those who are] living truly, | [The] grace of [a] good end and [of] a great joy after [that]: *Deign to return* [to us], *Lord God, &c.*'

PP.III.333-340

In this passage Conscience introduces the difference between “two maner relacions, | Rect and indirect”; he then proceeds to clarify the meaning of the first one, before being interrupted by the King. To paraphrase his explanation, we can say that while both relationships—“mede” and “mercede”—depend on a steadfast and reliable correspondence between service and remuneration, only the latter is based on a correspondence that can be deemed as “rect” as the grammatical relationship between “adiectif and sustantif.” These two parts of speech demand an “acordaunce in

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<sup>13</sup>For a detailed analysis of this grammatical argument, see Anne Middleton, “Two Infinities: Grammatical Metaphor in *Piers Plowman*,” *ELH* 39, no. 2 (1972): 169–88. For a discussion of these terms in relation to the theological question of God's grace, see Robert Adams, “Mede and Mercede: The Evolution of the Economics of Grace in PP B and C Versions,” in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig (Wolfeboro, N.H.: D.S. Brewer, 1988), 217–42. Paula Carlson has examined the specific motivations behind Langland's choice of adding this discussion to his third revision; see Paula J. Carlson, “Lady Meed and God's Meed: The Grammar of ‘*Piers Plowman*’ B 3 and C 4,” *Traditio* 46 (ed 1991): 291–311.

kynde, in case and in nombre.” Conscience is thinking of Latin here: Latin demands a tripartite agreement between subject and adjective, as in the phrase “*mercedem suam* (PP.III.312), where both elements agree in gender, case, and number: feminine, accusative, singular. Conscience explains that the three terms of this agreement evoke the perfection of the Trinity. So, this “relacion rect” replicates the absolute justice of God’s own “retribuoun,” perfectly commensurate to the merits of his subjects.

Like the clerks whom Will defends in his apologia, Conscience is deploying his knowledge of Latin to enlighten others. On this occasion, however, this knowledge is not being deployed as a means to expound a precept drawn from Scripture or from some other authority. Rather, the authority that substantiates Conscience’s argument belongs to the language itself, to its rules and structures, to the way that it establishes connections among referents. In short, the truth that Conscience preaches to the King is not *acquired through* Latin—it *is* Latin. Nevertheless, precisely because it depends so much on the speaker’s familiarity with Latin, the cogency of this argument is lost on the unlettered King. This same ruler—the one who needs the assistance of several “confessours” to construe the terms “*bonum*” and “*malum*”—asks Conscience to clarify the meaning of the phrases that denote these grammatical features, since the structures of English ostensibly lack them.

Quod the kyng to Consience, ‘Knowen Y wolde  
What is relacion rect and indirect aftur,  
Thenne adiectyf and sustantyf, for Englisch was it neuere.’

The King said to Consience, ‘I would like to know | What direct  
relationships are, and also indirect, | And then adjective and substantive,  
because [they] were never [in] English.’

PP.III.341-43

As an unlearned speaker of English, the King has not interiorized the notions of “rect” and “indirect” grammatical relationships, or even the morphological categories of “adiectyf and sustantyf.” To make up for his ignorance, Conscience starts by relating these terms to concrete occurrences that the King may find familiar. He explains, for instance, that the phrase “Relacioun rect” can be used to describe the fair remuneration that a “maister” must accord to a “leel laborer” (‘loyal laborer,’ *PP*.III.348-51); and that an “Indirect” one takes place when a son inherits his father’s patrimony without keeping his name (*PP*.III.366-67). Through these examples, Conscience applies these abstract linguistic categories to specific circumstances that belong to the King’s *hic et nunc*, thus practicing a translation *lato sensu* from received knowledge into “kynde knowyng”—a desirable achievement in *Piers Plowman*.

Yet, Conscience’s practical examples do not truly supplant the comprehension of these concepts that one may derive from an intimate familiarity with Latin; they only accompany it. Indeed, Conscience’s final recapitulation of the distinction between “relacion rect” and “indirect” still relies heavily on the metalanguage of Latin grammar.

This is relacion rect, ryht as adiectyf and sustantyf  
 Accordeth in alle kyndes with his antecedent.  
 Indirect thyng is as ho-so coueytede  
 Alle kyn kynde to knowe and to folowe  
 And withoute case to cache to and come to bothe nombres  
 In whiche ben gode and nat gode, and graunte here neyther will.

This is a direct relationship, just as adjective and substantive | Accord in all qualities with [their] antecedent[s]. | An indirect thing is [just] as anyone who coveted | To know and to follow all kinds of genders, | And to snatch at [something] without a case, and approach both numbers | In which are good and not good, and assent [to] neither [of] their will[s].

*PP*.III.363-66

For Conscience, the best illustration of “relacion rect” remains the grammatical relationship between “adiectyf and sustantyf,” which are meant to agree “in alle kyndes.” The metalanguage of Latin

grammar is also used to render the discordance and immorality that are instead attributed to “Indirect” relationships. Conscience condemns covetousness towards “Alle kyn kynde”; unlawful rapaciousness “without case”; and the moral confusion of attaching oneself “to bothe nombres”—a combination of inclinations “gode and nat gode” that results in an affirmation of “neyther will.” Conscience steers away from a direct exposition of what these notions denote within the domain of Latin; first by discussing some secular and spiritual analogues, and then by treating them as self-evident tropes that demand no clarification. In spite of his wish to “Knowen” their exact meaning and their relevance to the categories of “adiectyf and sustantyf,” the King cannot truly *know* these terms—only *know of* them.

I argue that Conscience does not offer a direct explanation of these grammatical terms to the King because, as the King himself has pointed out, “Englisch was it neuere.” In other words, the King’s lack of familiarity with Latin poses an insurmountable obstacle to his full comprehension of these concepts. It bears repeating that these categories are meant to encapsulate Conscience’s exposition of what separates “mede” from “mercede”; arguably then, the less one understands “rect” and “indirect,” the less one can assimilate the whole argument. In fact, a detailed exposition of “relacion rect” and “indirect”—and particularly with regard to “adiectyf and”sustantyf“—would lay open an implication that Langland insinuates but does not address openly; namely, that the structures of the King’s “Englisch” should also be deemed morally inferior to those of Conscience’s Latin.

For Langland, this moral inferiority stems from its lack of those “rect” relationships which Conscience relates to “mercede.” Of course, some kind of grammatical agreement also exists in the King’s “Englisch.” Middle English verbs are supposed to agree with their subjects in person and number; articles match the number of the nouns that follow them; and personal pronouns express the number, gender, and occasionally the case of their referents. Nevertheless, no such agreement exists in the concordance between a Middle English “adiectyf” and a “sustantyf”—precisely the

circumstance contemplated by Conscience. Unlike Latin nouns, Middle English nouns possess no grammatical gender and are not inflected for case—only for number. Even more conspicuously, Middle English adjectives are not inflected at all—they simply adhere to the noun placed next to them, without undergoing any sort of variation. In other words, the King’s “Englisch” completely eludes the principle of “relacion rect.” Its adjectives and nouns behave precisely like the covetous, immoral, and ambivalent characters denounced by Conscience; they covet “alle kyn kynde,” seize all they can “without case,” and fasten onto “bothe nombres.” Conscience refuses to render this distinction into English because he knows that its vernacular structures cannot at all convey the perfect agreement that he has praised in Latin. The morally enlightening effect of Latin would be lost in translation.

Conscience implies that Latin can offer more moral enlightenment than English because its structures themselves abide by and signify moral principles and spiritual tenets. The agreement between “adiectyf” and “sustantyf” in Latin should serve as a model for the relationships of “mercede” between employer and employee, king and commons, lord and vassal; and this same tripartite agreement ultimately mirrors the relationship between humankind and God, realized through the three persons of the Trinity. Latin embodies “mercede”; it serves as a tool to interiorize “mercede,” and “mercede” is somehow enacted whenever a Latin speaker or writer establishes a relationship between “adiectyf” and “sustantyf.” A true assertion made in Latin consequently satisfies a double criterion of “Treuthe”; it reproduces reality truthfully and it establishes a truthful reciprocity among its formal components. By contrast, the King’s “Englisch” is implicitly likened to a language of “mede”; its “indirect” structures are portrayed as asymmetrical, unjust, perhaps even predatory. While a Latin statement serves as a model of fairness and truthfulness, and as an enactment of such principles, an “Englisch” statement rejects this model, and in fact enacts its opposite. Albeit true, an assertion in “Englisch” cannot meet the same criterion of formal reciprocity that is instead satisfied

by Latin. Thus, Conscience's treatment of the distinction between "mede" and "mercede"—represented in terms of "indirect" and "rect" relationships—ultimately asserts the moral and spiritual superiority of Latin grammar over the King's unlearned "Englich."

Conscience's assumption that English should be deemed less truthful and less moral than Latin accounts for the "los" that Will laments at the end of his apologia. Will resorts to vernacular translation in order to return the knowledge that he has acquired through Latin, so that he may fulfill his responsibility as a clerk. This translation unfolds like the "bargayn" of his simile; in it, two allegedly equivalent propositions—one English, one Latin—are exchanged. Nevertheless, this exchange produces "los" rather than "profit." The "mercede" of Latin is replaced by the "mede" of English, and the trade eventually comes across as asymmetrical, unjust, perhaps even predatory. With keenness, Langland introduces the concept of untranslatability: much of what a given language conveys simply cannot be translated into a different language. Conscience's account of "rect" and "indirect" relationships demonstrates this assumption: The specific effects and meanings of Latin inhere in its inalienable formal constituents and cannot be rendered through any other means. The existence of such untranslatable features compromises the mediator's task and threatens the validity of every act of translation depicted in the poem. All in all, unless God accords them a "gobet of his grace," the *reddere* of knowledge that behooves clerks can never be fully realized through vernacular translation. Any turn from Latin into English entails a distancing from and a lessening of "Treuthe," a moral deterioration and a loss of meaning.

### III. GLOSSING GLOTOUN'S LOSS

At the core of Langland's stance towards vernacular translation we find an implicit paradox. Langland regards this practice as widely useful; indeed, it constitutes a responsibility for learned clerks like him, and a necessity for unlearned people. Yet, every time that a Latin precept is turned

into “Englisch,” something is lost—in its meaning, in its truthfulness, and in its morality. As I have shown, this loss is caused by the insurmountable differences that exist between Latin and the vernacular, and it may explain the bitter and moving simile of a losing “bargayn” which Will uses to put an end to his apologia. What are the consequences of the semantic, epistemological, and moral losses caused by vernacular translation, and how can they be avoided in practice? In what follows, I will investigate how Langland addresses the repercussions of this paradox. Langland addresses these questions by figuring this particular loss as an allegorical personification: namely, as the character of “Glotoun.”

In the third revision of the poem, Glotoun—the embodiment of the capital sin of gluttony—makes his first appearance towards the conclusion of a section that critics have dubbed the “Confession of the Sins.” In the “Confession,” the personification of each capital sin delivers a speech and a performance of contrition before the personification of Repentance, with the alleged purpose of being absolved. Remarkably, the “Confession” immediately follows Will’s apologia—coming right after the simile of the “bargayn” discussed above. In the next few pages, I will argue that this suggestive placement is meant to foreground the potential continuity between Will’s own display of contrition and the transgressions related by these personified sins. In particular, I will examine how Langland imbues the “Confession” with imagery and concepts associated with the late-medieval notion of the “sins of the tongue,” which bracketed together all sins that involved eating, drinking, and speaking. Such transgressions are imputed to virtually every sin who appears in the “Confession,” in a climax that culminates with Glotoun himself. I will then suggest that the unique features attributed to the personification of Glotoun invite us to read him as a figure for a particular sin of the tongue: namely, a kind of vernacular translation that obfuscates and wastes the knowledge that it is meant to disclose to others, and which Langland conflates with the falsification denoted by the verb “glosen.” Finally, I will propose that, by identifying sinful vernacular translation with

gluttony, Langland indicates a practical criterion for its proper deployment. Like food, vernacular translation should be consumed only when one needs it; otherwise its waste of knowledge turns utterly detrimental and sinful.

### THE SIN OF “GLOSEN”

Langland associates this detrimental waste of knowledge with the term “glosen,” which appears several times in the third revision of *Piers Plowman*. In Langland’s time, this word denoted two antithetical actions, like the Modern English “to gloss”: It meant not only “to expound,” but also—and more frequently—“to confound” or “to falsify.” Before I consider how Glotoun embodies this wasteful notion of “glosen” and how this embodiment relates to vernacular translation, I will briefly examine how Langland uses this word in the rest of the poem. In fact, Langland writes about “glosen” far more often than he does about “construen” or “rendren,” the two verbs that he associates with the positive effects of translation. On very few occasions, “glosen” too seems to retain some positive connotations for Langland. For instance, Dame Studie lists the composition of a “sauter yglosed” (‘glossed psalter,’ *PP*.XI.115) as one of her indisputably useful accomplishments. Will himself sets his eyes on an illuminating “glose [...] gloriously written with a gult penne” (‘gloss [...] gloriously written with a gilt pen’ *PP*.XIX.16) during his conversation with the personification of Hope. In these examples, the word appears either as a past participle with adjectival function or as a noun; terms that do not designate the action of glossing, but the preexistent glosses—unmistakably written—consumed by the dreamer.

Now, these useful and illuminating written glosses constitute the rare exception in *Piers Plowman*. In most cases, Langland uses “glosen” to denote the action of obscuring what a text says through deceitful speech. In the colorful gallery of social types that opens the poem, friars are depicted as they “Prech[ed] the peple for profyt of the wombe, | And glosede the gospel as hem good likede” (‘Preach[ed] to the people for profit of the womb, and glossed the gospel as it pleased

them well,' *PP*.Prol.57-58). Later, Reason warns the king against heeding all sorts of "glosynge speche" during the debate on Lady Mede's future (*PP*.IV.138). Finally, a friar who "goeth and gedereth and gloseth ther he shryueth" ('goes and collects [money] and deceives where he confesses [people],' *PP*.XXII.368) provokes the apocalyptic assault on Christianity which puts an end to the dreamer's vision. Langland invites us to regard "glosen" as a mischievous practice that undermines one's understanding of Scripture and Latin authority, hinders one's judgment, and threatens one's spiritual security; a practice that learned people carry out through their speech and with the purpose of securing material profits for themselves.

### CONFESSING THE "SINS OF THE TONGUE"

Therefore, as one of the sinful actions committed by clerks like him, "glosen" plays a prominent role in the "Confession of the Sins" that follows Will's apologia. In the next few pages, I will corroborate this claim by explaining how the "Confession" serves to complement Will's self-portrait and the contrition in which it culminates. Indeed, I maintain that the personified sins who introduce themselves and who confess their transgressions to Repentance emanate from Will himself. For this reason, the "Confession" starts with Will alone before Repentance, who "rehersede his teme | And made Will to wepe water with his eyes" ('recited his [homiletic] theme | And made Will weep water with his eyes,' *PP*.VI.1-2). The flow of the "Confession" starts with the "water" of Will's tears. Pride, the sin who speaks first, brags that people disobey the authority of elders and clergymen because her "word and [her] witt" make their "euel werkes" ('evil deeds,' *PP*.VI.21) known to all: a fault that could easily be attributed to the poet of *Piers Plowman*, whose witty words often denounce the vices of those in power. Similarly, Pride boasts about being the most suited "To telle eny tale" or "To carpe and to consayle" ('to tell any tale,' 'to recite and to advise' *PP*.VI.28-29), echoing Will's own presentation as an adviser and as a minstrel. While the apologia concentrates on

Will's place in society and on his responsibilities as a clerk, the "Confession" complements this perspective by placing emphasis on the detrimental effects of his words.

As it concentrates on those verbal sins committed by the poet, the "Confession" contains imagery that underlines the broad and pervasive repercussions of sinful speeches and texts. In particular, here Langland's imagery evokes a taxonomic convention shared by several late-medieval penitential manuals and based on widespread religious and physiological beliefs: the category of the "sins of the tongue." Manuals and treatises that abided by this convention grouped together all those sins that involved the use of one's mouth: so, blasphemies, lies, and garrulousness were placed alongside drunkenness and gluttony. Langland simultaneously observes and overturns this convention by turning virtually every sin into a "sin of the tongue." All sins pass through the mouth in the "Confession," and nearly all combine the circulation of words with that of food or drink. Envy, the second sin in the series, draws attention to the mouth by citing a long passage from Scripture where a psalmist condemns the wretchedness of backbiters.

*Cuius maledictione os plenum est et amaritudine, sub lingua eius labor et dolor.  
Fili hominum, dentes eorum arma et sagitte; et lingua eorum gladius acutus.*

Whose mouth is full of curse[s] and bitterness, and under whose tongue lie worry and pain. | Sons of men, their teeth [are] weapons and arrows; and their tongue [is] a sharp sword.

PP.VI.76bc

Cited in their entirety and without a translation, these long quotations impel Envy to underline the harshness of these reprimands precisely through the organs that they mention: to fill his mouth—make his "os plenum"—with the polysyllabic ablatives "maledictione" and "amaritudine"; to voice through his tongue—"sub lingua"—the repeated trills of the homoteleuton "labor et dolor"; to feel against his teeth the consonance of "dentes [...] et sagitte." As they gradually touch upon each part of the mouth, these Latin fragments turn Envy's bitterness into sounds that one can almost taste.

Indeed, taste becomes the topic of the lines that follow, where Envy shifts focus from the detrimental effects of his venomous speech to the bitter food that has tainted his diet and his body.

Y myhte nat ete many yer as a man ouhte  
For enuye and euyl wil is euel to defye.  
May no sugre ne swete thing aswage my swellinge  
Ne derworth drynke dryue hit fro myn herte  
Ne nother shame ne shryfte, but ho-so shrapede my mawe?

I might not eat [for] many years as a man should, | Since envy and evil will  
are evil to digest. | May neither sugar nor sweet thing mitigate my swelling,  
Nor an excellent drink drive it [away] from my heart, | Nor shame, nor  
shriving, unless someone scraped my stomach?

*PP.VI.86-90)*

The suggestive imagery that pervades these lines hinges on the conflation of spiritual and material referents. More precisely, these lines depict this conflation as a progressive turn from the intangible to the grossly concrete, with the “enuye and euyl” of Envy’s words becoming more and more substantial. This process starts in the mouth, where these feelings ostensibly take the place of the actual food that “a man ouhte consume.” From there, as they move down the esophagus, they acquire a solidity that turns spiritual “euyl” into the material quality of a substance that “is euel to defye.” In the stomach they grow into a “swellinge” that cannot be “aswage[d]” or “dryu[en]” out of the body by either the excellency of an uplifting “derworth drynke” or the otherwise redeeming compunction of feeling “nother shame ne shryfte.” If anything, only a crude “shrap[ing]” of Envy’s encrusted “mawe” may relieve him. All in all, this vivid description blurs the line between spiritual cause and bodily manifestation. In part, this fusion rests on the medieval theory of the humors, to which Envy indeed alludes. Few lines before the passage quoted above, he describes how, fostered by his resentful speech, his bitter disposition has produced an excess of black bile—“malecolie”—which in turn has caused “the Crompe” and “the cardiacle” (‘cramp,’ ‘chest-pain,’ *PP.VI.77-78*). Yet, Langland does not stress Envy’s humors as much as he gives prominence to Envy’s words.

Language, a faculty that Langland and most medieval thinkers placed at the intersection between the spiritual and the material dimensions of human existence, comes across as the true link between Envy's spiritual corruption and the material degradation of his body.

So, Envy's performance stresses how bitter words can harm the body of the speaker by literally clogging one's stomach. In his case, the sin is turned inwards; it lingers and swells inside the sinner. Nevertheless, as the "Confession" goes on, the imagery of words as food turns outwards, to describe the detrimental effects that sinful language can produce in others. These images treat speech as a sort of poisonous commodity, an evil produced by one and shared by many. Wrath, the third personification, introduces this concept in his performance, when he describes how he worked as a cook in the kitchen of a nuns' convent.

Y haue be coek in here kychene and the couent serued,  
Mony monthes with hem and with monkes bothe.  
I was the prioresse potager and other pore ladies  
And made hem ioutes of iangelynge: "Dame Ione was a bastard  
And dame Clarice a knyhtes douhter, a cokewolde was here syre,  
And dame Purnele a prestis fyle—prioresse worth [s]he neuere;  
For [s]he hadde childe in the chapun-cote [s]he worth chalenged at the  
eleccioun."  
Thus sytte they, tho sustres, som tyme and disputen  
Til "thow lixt" and "thow lixt" be lady ouer hem alle;  
And thanne awake Y, Wrathe, and wolde be avenged.

I have been [a] cook in their kitchen, and served the convent, | [Spent] many  
months both with them and with monks. | I was the prioress's soup maker  
and [served] other poor ladies | And made soups of gossip [for] them:  
"Dame Ione was a bastard | And dame Clarice a knight's daughter, her father  
was a cuckold, | And dame Purnele a priest's wench—she [was] never worthy  
[of being] a prioress; | Since she had [a] child in the capon's coop she is  
challenged in the election." So they sit, those sisters, [for] some time, and  
argue, | Until "you lie" and "you lie" is the queen over them all; | And then I,  
Wrath, awake, and will be avenged.

*PP.VI.130-139*

The figure that underpins this passage lays bare in the phrase “ioutes of iangelynge.” Derived from the Old French “joute,” the word “ioute” denotes a “soup or pottage made of boiled vegetables or herbs”:<sup>14</sup> a simple dish that combines several humble ingredients, mixed together in a pot and cooked slowly for a long time. In Wrath’s “ioute,” the diverse ingredients that are stewed together over time are not vegetables but “iangelynge”: pieces of “chatter,” “quarreling,” and “spiteful gossip.” The scene hovers ambiguously between literal and figurative referents. On the one hand, we may imagine the sin of Wrath spreading among these nuns, ignited by nobody in particular and manifesting itself in disparate remarks. On the other, we may picture an actual “coek” and “potager,” busy in his “kychene” and dishing out hateful prattle as an accompaniment to his bowls of soup. Through this ambiguity, these lines effectively convey the latent contagiousness of such statements, uttered by one yet actually shared by all, dissolved into air yet actually assimilated into memory. Sinful language proliferates, slowly but steadily, and eventually pushes the whole community towards mortal sin. Culminating in a hypermetrical line and punctuated by the anaphora of the conjunction “And,” the reported speech accentuates how the repetition of this gossip eventually escapes the control of whoever started it. Like the broth in which the cook boils his “ioute,” the convent stews the various pieces of this gossip for “sum tyme,” until mutual accusations—“thow lixt’ and ‘thow lixt’”—start bubbling on its surface. Then the meal is ready: “Wrathe” can emerge to be “avenged” among the nuns. The “Confession” gradually expands the scope of its ongoing meditation on the detrimental effects of language, shifting its focus from the subject to the community.

As a whole, the “Confession” concentrates on the material effects of sin and on how these effects propagate from the subject to the rest of society. The taxonomy and the imagery of the “sins of the tongue” adequately capture this twofold purpose. Like eating, sin materially affects one’s body, crystallizing into habits that alter one’s health and appearance over time; it also affects the allocation

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<sup>14</sup> “Ioute.” *Middle English Compendium*.

of finite resources—such as food— that ought to be shared among all members of a community. Like speaking, sin propagates from person to person, often beyond the control of whoever initiates it. Accordingly, the “Confession” gives great prominence to the aperture through which eating and speaking are carried out: the mouth. In the “Confession,” sin flows through the mouth; it manifests itself on one’s mouth, it is committed through the mouth, and it grows through the mouth. The centrality of this organ for the “Confession” is perhaps best summarized in Lechery’s rapturous description of his recurrent sexual encounters.

For eche mayde that Y mette Y made here a signe  
 Semyng to synneward and summe Y gan taste  
 Aboute the mouthe and bynthe bygan Y to grope,  
 Til bothe oure wil was oen and to the werk we yeden  
 As wel fastyng-dayes as Frydayes and heye-feste euenes,  
 As leef in lente as out of lente, alle tymes ylyche—  
 Such werkes with vs were neuere out of sesoun;  
 Til we myhte no more; thenne hadde we mery tales.  
 Of putrie and of paramours and preueden thorw speche  
 And handlyng and halsyng and also thorw kyssyng,  
 Exited either other til oure olde synne;

For each maid that I met I made her a gesture | Appearing to [be pointing] in  
 the direction of sin, and some [of them] I began to taste | Around the mouth  
 and beneath I began to grope, | Until both our wills were one and we went to  
 [do] the work, | Fasting days as well as Fridays and the eves of solemn feasts,  
 | As desirable during Lent as outside of Lent, all times in the same way— |  
 Such works were never out of season with us; | Until we could no more; then  
 we had merry tales. | Of debauchery and of lovers and we tested them  
 through speech and handling and embracing and also through kissing, |  
 Excited each other towards our old sin.

*PP.VI.178-88*

To indicate his success at seducing “summe” of the many women whom he invites to have sex with him, Lechery deploys the phrase “gan taste | Aboute the mouthe.” The enjambment that splits this phrase magnifies the scope of this act of “tast[ing]” and its reciprocity. By itself, the verb “tasten” signals that Lechery’s mouth is the first part of his body involved in this sin; but the indirect object

“About the mouthe” clarifies that this “tasten” is shared between him and his necessary accomplices—that Lechery is tasted as much as he tastes. The sinful deed “gan” in the mouth and is shared through the mouth. It persists in defiance of the abstinence imposed during “fasting dayes”—when one should restrain from both sex and food—and it is fueled by lascivious “speche.” The mouth, open for “kyssyng” at the beginning of the intercourse, reopens when one’s sexual “myhte” is depleted: “thenne hadde we mery tales.” As in the case of Envy and Wrath, the language of Lechery serves as the tinder that ignites and propagates sin; it “Exited” the lovers to fall, again and again, “til” the “olde synne.” Syntactically unbroken, the impetuous and virtually unstoppable flow of Lechery’s monologue ultimately comes across as another “signe | Semyng to synneward”: another speech used for initiating, propagating, and rekindling sin. This emphasis on the oral dimension of sin escalates in the first part of the “Confession.” The section starts with Pride’s boast about telling stories and denouncing the wrongdoings of powerful people; it continues with Envy’s bitter backbiting and with Wrath’s contagious gossip; and it ends with Lechery’s fixation with the mouth as a fountainhead of sin.

## HOW TO RETURN “RESTITUCIOUN”

In what follows, I will examine how this theme carries over into the second part of the “Confession,” albeit in a less conspicuous fashion. With the next two personifications in the series, Covetousness and “Glotoun,” Langland zeroes in on a specific linguistic transgression: “glosen,” or the obfuscation of the knowledge conveyed by scriptural and Latin authorities. Langland first creates an opportunity for “glosen” at the end of Covetousness’s speech: a doubt concerning the meaning of the Latinate word “restitucioun.” He then introduces two personifications that interrupt the sequence of atoning sins: “Yeuan” and “Robert.” These two characters embody the two senses of the verb “glosen”: expounding and obscuring. While Yeuan adequately expounds the concept of “restitucioun,” Robert advances an argument that partly obscures its function. I will then

demonstrate how the next character who speaks in the “Confession,” “Gloutoun,” serves not only as a personification of the sixth capital sin, but as a third embodiment of “glosen.” Indeed, Gloutoun embodies the most extreme and detrimental kind of gloss: one that utterly wastes the knowledge carried by an authoritative text. Finally, I will examine how Langland centers Gloutoun’s performance on a game of bargains that replicates Will’s simile of a losing “bargayn” in the apologia.

This parallel confirms that Gloutoun’s “glosen” can also encompass the semantic and moral loss caused by vernacular translation. The conclusion of the “Confession” continues its exploration of the relationship between language and sin by zeroing in on the deceiving act of “glosen.” Nevertheless, the first mention of “glosen” that we find in this section presents it as a useful and necessary practice. In particular, the personification of Repentance resorts to a gloss during his exchange with the personification of Covetousness. Repentance explains that Covetousness’s confession and contrition cannot be deemed sufficient to grant him absolution. In order to be truly forgiven and redeemed, Covetousness must return what he has illicitly gained through theft, deception, and usury. Repentance calls this return “restitucioun” and explains the meaning of this term with a Latin excerpt from canon law.

For the pope with alle his pentauncers power hem fayleth  
To assoyle the of this synne *sine restitucione*.  
*Numquam dimittitur peccatum, nisi restituatur ablatum.*

Because the pope and all his confessors lack the power | To absolve you of  
this sin *without restitution*: | *The sin is never absolved, if what is stolen is not returned.*

PP.VI.256-57

But Covetousness can hardly interpret a Latin passage on his own without twisting its essence. When he cites a line from Matthew’s Gospel—“*Vbi thesaurus tuus ibi cor tuum*” (Matt. 6:21)—he completely overturns its meaning, mistaking the true “thesaurus” of heavenly bliss—everlasting and secure when compared with fleeting earthly goods—for the material “godes” that cause him constant

apprehension (*PP.VI.284-285*). With regard to “restitucioun,” Covetousness brings this misreading to a comical extreme.

‘Repentesdow neuere?’ quod Repentaunce, ‘ne restitucioun madest?’  
‘Yus, ones Y was herberwed,’ quod he, ‘with an heep of chapmen;  
Y roes and ryfled here males when they a-reste were.’  
‘That was a rufol restitucioun,’ quod Repentaunce, ‘for sothe;  
Thow wolt be hanged heye therfore, here other in helle!

‘Have you ever repented?’ said Repentance, ‘Or made restitution?’ | ‘Yes,  
once I was harbored,’ he said, ‘with a bunch of merchants; | I rose and rifled  
their bags when they were rest-ing.’ | ‘That was a wretched restitution,’ said  
Repentance, ‘forsooth; | You will be hanged high for that reason, either here  
or in hell!’

*PP.VI.234-39*

When Repentance first asks him whether he has made “restitution,” Covetousness interprets the Latinate term as a cognate of the expression “a-reste,” meaning “asleep.” So, instead of clarifying whether he has returned what he has stolen, Covetousness confesses yet another instance of stealing—only, this time involving people who were “a-reste.” Albeit ostensibly laughable, this misunderstanding hints at Covetousness’s lack of familiarity with Latin. As Repentance’s citation has highlighted, the noun “restitucioun” was borrowed from Latin; in Langland’s time it was mainly used as a technical term belonging to the field of law.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, Covetousness’s misinterpretation rested on a Germanic root that persisted in Old and Middle English: the verb “resten,” pertaining entirely to Langland’s vernacular.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, one could read Covetousness’s misconstructions as a ruse; a deliberate attempt to confound his interlocutor, analogous to the “gyle and glosynge” (‘treachery and cajoling,’ *PP.VI.258-59*) with which he has amassed his wealth. Still, even as a ruse,

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<sup>15</sup> “Restitucioun.” *Middle English Compendium*.

<sup>16</sup> “Resten.” *Middle English Compendium*.

his distortion of Scripture's teaching and of Repentance's injunction is presented a failure to construe the knowledge transmitted through Latin.

Since Covetousness ostensibly fails to understand the meaning of "restitucioun," Repentance cannot refrain from explaining what it means. In order to be absolved, Covetousness must make "restitucioun"; but he must understand what the noun means before he can perform the action that it designates. Without a clarification, Covetousness is almost entitled to misinterpret and ignore the injunction. A mediation becomes necessary. As the learned person in this exchange, Repentance now holds the responsibility that Langland attributes to clerks. He must return the knowledge he keeps, thus performing a sort of "restitucioun" of what he has gathered from the law. In a way, therefore, Covetousness's "restitucioun" depends on Repentance's own "restitucioun." So, Repentance now proceeds to offer an explanation of the concept by translating the Latin precept that he has cited into the vernacular; then, he illustrates it with a concrete and specific example related to his interlocutor's lived experience; finally, he directs him to a "sauter glosed" for further enlightenment.

”Thow art an vnkynde creature; Y can the nat assoile  
Til thow haue ymad by thy myhte to alle men restitucioun;  
For alle that hauen of thy good, haue god my treuthe,  
Ys haldyng at the heye dome to helpe the restitue.  
Ye, the prest that thy tythe toek, trowe Y non other,  
Shal parte with the in purgatorye and helpe paye the dette  
Yf he wiste thow were such when he resseyued thyn offrynge.  
And what lede leueth that Y lye, look in the sauter glosed  
On *Ecce enim veritatem dilexisti*,  
And there shal he wite witterly what vsure is to mene,  
And what penaunce the prest shal haue that proud is of his tithes.

“You are an unkind creature; I cannot absolve you | Until you have made  
restitution to all men according to your ability; | Since all those who partake  
of your wealth, [may] God have my truth, | Are obliged to help you return  
[what is owed] at the Great Judgment. | Yes, [even] the priest that took your  
tithes, I believe no one else, | Shall share [your punishment] with you in  
Purgatory and help you pay the debt | If he knew you were such [a dishonest  
man] when he received your offer. | And any man who believes that I lie, [he  
should] look in the glosed psalter | Alongside *Ecce enim veritatem dilexisti*, |

And there he shall truly learn what usury is [supposed] to mean, | And what penance a priest who is proud of his tithes shall have.’

PP.VI.294-304

Repentance reiterates that Covetousness needs to return what he has stolen, but this time his injunction to make “restitucioun” is not supplemented by any Latin quotation. Rather, his explanation of why Covetousness cannot be absolved consists of a straightforward statement in the vernacular, which closely paraphrases the Latin maxim that he has cited few lines earlier (“*Numquam dimittitur peccatum, nisi restituatur ablatum*”). Having recognized Covetousness’s failure to interpret Latin and Latinate terms, Repentance translates the precept and applies it to Covetousness’s *hic et nunc*; thus, he turns the indefinite pronouns and passive voice of the Latin rule into an active conditional sentence that centers on the personal pronouns “Y” and “thow.” He then highlights the concrete and particular consequences of Covetousness’s transgression by considering what will happen to “the preste” himself who received his “tithes.” His exposition in the vernacular leaves little room for misinterpretation. Yet, to further corroborate this point, he invites the potential doubter in the audience to “look in the sauter glosed,” where the psalm “*Ecce enim veritatem dilexisti*” is interpreted as a commentary on the prerequisite of “restitucioun.” This is one of the few instances where the term “glosen” seems to denote a positive practice for Langland. The gloss complements Repentance’s exposition as a sort of third degree in the understanding of “restitucioun.” First, the injunction is rendered into the vernacular; then it is applied to a concrete and particular circumstance, familiar to the recipient; and finally, it is validated as a gloss to scriptural passage.

#### GLOSSES THAT GIVE, GLOSSES THAT ROB

This allusion to “glosen” seems to grow in importance as the “Confession” unfolds. After Repentance’s exposition, two unexpected characters—“Yeuan” and “Robert”—interrupt the sequence of personified sins, delivering their own confessions in the interval that separates

Covetousness's performance from Glotoun's entrance. These interjections continue Repentance's exposition of "restitucioun": Yeuan returns all that he has illicitly gained, while Robert, who does no longer own enough wealth to do so, begs God for mercy. I maintain that in these lines Robert and Yeuan serve as two complementary allegorical personifications, meant to personify the meaning of "restitucioun." However, their function as allegorical personifications blends with the practice of "glosen." Not only do they embody what "restitucioun" means, but they expand on its implications, creating an opportunity for the obfuscation of knowledge that Langland associates with the negative connotation of "glosen." Thus, Langland stresses the analogies between personification and "glosen": Both these devices presuppose that a foreign or unfamiliar concept can be made more easily understandable, and more capable of engaging the reader intellectually and emotionally, if it is somehow embodied in the reader's reality. A scriptural gloss expounds a passage by showing how it can enlighten one's understanding of theology or dictate one's behavior in the world. Similarly, a personification takes an abstract concept and expounds it by imagining how this concept would think, speak, and behave if it existed as a person in the world of the reader.

This latter definition of personification is indeed well exemplified by the character of Yeuan, who embodies the virtuous behavior of a covetous person who is rightly absolved after having made "restitucioun."

Thenne was there a Walschman was wonderly sory, Hyhte Yeuan-yelde-  
 ayeyn-yf-Y-so-moche-haue- Al-that-Y-wikkedly-wan-sithen-Y-witte-hadde:  
 'And thow my lyflode lakke, letten Y nelle  
 That eche man ne shal haue his ar Y hennes wende,  
 For me is leuere in this lyue as a lorel begge  
 Then in lysse to lyue and lese lyf and soule.'

Then there was a Welshman [who] was marvelously sorry, | Named  
Yeuanpay-again-if-I-have-so-much- | Al-that-I-wickedly-gained-since-I-had-  
wits: | 'And although I [may] lack my livelihood, I will not allow | That any  
man shall not have his [share of what I owe] before I go away, | Because it is  
dearer to me to beg as a wretch in this life | Than to live in comfort and lose  
[my] life and [my] soul.'

*PP.VI.308-314*

Yeuan exists as an embodiment of “restitucioun.” The long string of words that make up his full name offer a candid yet rigorous definition of the Latinate noun. Unlike Repentance’s, this definition relies solely on vernacular terms—all consistently Germanic in their derivation. Instead of “restitute” and “restitucioun,” this allegorical name refers to “yelde” and “wan”; indeed, the Welsh name “Yeuan” itself could be read as a paronomasia for the basic imperative “yeuen,” ‘to give,’ at the core of “restitucioun.” The character further demonstrates the attitude of contrition—“wonderly sorry”—that befits the fulfilment of this prerequisite; and he also relates the internal disposition that should motivate it: to prefer one’s eternal “lyf and soule” to one’s material “lyflode.” So, Yeuan serves as a walking translation of the term; a walking gloss, placed in the text to encapsulate the correct denotation of a difficult, yet pivotal concept. All in all, the character represents an effective deployment of personification as an instrument for “glosen”; not only do his listeners learn what the concept means, but they are also told what feelings, thoughts, and motivations it entails.

Still, if personification can serve as an instrument to effectively “glosen” the meaning of a concept, in the sense of expounding the term for an unlearned reader, it may also be deployed to put into effect the opposite kind of “glosen”—that is, to obscure and falsify. To put it differently, when Yeouan embodies “restitucion,” the meaning of the word is itself restituted, returned to the listeners in the form of vernacular precepts that can be assimilated and followed; but Langland implies that this meaning can also be taken away from them—robbed, wasted, lost. The two personifications who come after Yeuan in the “Confession” embody this dishonest return of knowledge, in a climax that

starts with a seemingly admissible exception to “restitucioun”—solicited by Robert— and ends with a flagrant negation of all “restitucioun”—exemplified by the wasteful Glotoun. Robert, who speaks immediately after Yeuan, operates precisely within the domain of interpretation accorded to “glosen.” His speech springs from the scrutiny of the word “*reddite*” (“return”): an imperative contained in the gloss to the psalter cited by Repentance—at which he “lokede” from the side, like a second marginal gloss. Robert explains that, even though he should return what he has stolen, he has no property left to do so; so he asks whether Christ may save him anyway, since he chose to save the penitent thief who was crucified with him.

Robert the ruyflare on *reddite* lokede  
And for ther was nat wherwith a wep swythe sore.  
Ac yut that synful shrewe saide to heuene:  
‘Crist, that on Caluarie on the crosse deyedest  
Tho Dysmas my brother bisouhte the of grace  
And haddest mercy vppon that man for *memento* his sake,  
So rewe on Robert that *reddere* ne haue  
Ne neuere wene to wyne with craft that Y knowe.’

Robert the robber looked on *reddite* | And since there was nothing by which  
[he could do so] he wept very painfully. | And yet that sinful rascal said to  
heaven: | '[Oh] Christ, who died on [the] Calvary on the cross, | When  
Dismas, my brother, beseeched you for grace, | And [you] had mercy on that  
men [to] *memento* for his sake, | So have pity on Robert that has no *reddere* |  
And never supposes to win [any] with [any] craft that I know.'

PP.VI.315-322

The argument that Robert advances here cannot be deemed unreasonable or unorthodox. On the contrary, the notion that no sin could lie outside of God’s potential mercy and forgiveness was vehemently supported by preachers. A person who doubted this doctrine, and who assumed to live in a state of irreversible damnation, would in fact have committed the far graver sin of “wanhope,” or despair. So, as Repentance confirms in the following lines, Robert could indeed be excused from the obligation of “*reddere*” if he felt sincere contrition and if he truly lacked the means to return what

he has stolen. However, precisely this concession turns Robert into a “ruyflare” and into a “synful shrewe,” who resorts to “glosen” in order to fulfill his own selfish ends. Exempted from *reddere* the goods that he has stolen, Robert fails to *reddere* the meaning of the Latin precept.

### GLOTOUN’S LOSING “RESTITUCIOUN”

As he robs “restitucioun” of its universal validity, Robert refuses to “*reddere*” not only the material goods that he has stolen, but the knowledge that he has acquired from the Latin text that he has set out to gloss. As a consequence, even though the debate on “restitucioun” may have diverted the poet’s attention from the “sins of the tongue” and the figure of words as food, the “Confession” has maintained its emphasis on language and on the propagation of sin associated with it. The “Confession” remains a complement to Will’s apologia; the two personified glosses who speak after Covetousness represent two approaches to one of his main responsibilities as a clerk: to explain and to implement those precepts that can be drawn from scriptural and Latin authorities. In the third revision of *Piers Plowman*, the “Confession” culminates in the performance of Glotoun, the personification of gluttony. I will now demonstrate how this performance combines the motifs that have emerged in the “Confession” into one extended figure; in other words, how it depicts the refusal to “*reddere*” that characterizes Robert’s “glosen” as one of the “sins of the tongue.” By doing so, Glotoun’s performance harks back to the theme of vernacular translation as well, embodying the loss of meaning, morality, and truth that inevitably occurs in the transition from Latin into English.

Glotoun breaks the mold of the “Confession.” Of all the personified sins who perform in it, he comes across as the most embodied in the vernacular *hic et nunc* of Langland’s lived experience. Several formal choices set him apart from every other speaker in this section. First, he is the only personified sin whom Langland identifies with a concrete noun rather than an abstract noun. He is not called “Glotonye”—the abstract term that, like “Enuye” or “Coueytyse,” would identify a capital sin in general— but “Glotoun”: a single Glutton who may serve as a sample of the whole sin, but

who cannot comprise the whole sin. From his inception, Glotoun exists in the particular and the concrete; already translated into the tangible reality familiar to Langland and to his audience. Second, Glotoun does not start his performance with words, but with actions. All the other sins' performances unfold like dramatic speeches; the personifications make gestures and deliver monologues in front of an audience. Glotoun's performance alone takes the form of a third-person narrative.

Now bygynneth Glotoun for to go to shryfte  
And kayres hym to kyrke-ward, his coupe to shewe.  
Fastyng on a Friday forth gan he wende  
By Betene hous the brewestere, that bad hym good morwen,  
And whodeward he wolde the breuh-wyf hym askede.

Now Glotoun begins to go to confession | And betakes himself towards the  
church, to disclose his guilt. | Fasting on a Friday he began to go forth |  
[Passing] by the house of Betty the Brewer, who bid him good morning, |  
And the alewife asked him where he would [go].

*PP.VI.350-354*

Langland does not concentrate on what Glotoun says, but on what Glotoun does. Although the first line relates how he “bygynneth” to follow the example of the sins who have spoken before him, getting ready “to shryfte” and “his coupe to shewe,” the verbs that denote his intention to speak are rapidly surpassed by those that depict him in motion: “to go,” “kayres hym,” “gan he wende.” The rest of his performance matches this opening. Glotoun exists in action; paraphrasing Bernard's dictum and Reason's advice, which I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, he comes into view not as a precept but as embodied behavior, already translated into works—“ver[sus] in opera” and “worch[ed] in werke.” Third, Glotoun's performance takes place in a distinct and recognizable setting. Even though other personified sins mention specific places in their speeches, the speeches themselves could be delivered from any empty stage, with Repentance as the sole interlocutor. On the contrary, Glotoun cannot be detached from the concrete *hic et nunc* of his lived experience. His

performance happens in a London street, between his house and his church, and around a brewer's "houe." It begins with the temporal adverb "Now," locates him in a tangible and familiar setting, and surrounds him with people who bear proper names.

Thenne goth Glotoun in and Grete Othes aftur.  
Sesse the souhteres saet on the benche,  
Watte the wernare and his wyf dronke,  
Tymme the tynekare and tweyne of his knaues,  
Hicke the hackeynaman and Hewe the nedlare,  
Claryce of Cockes lane and the clerke of the church,  
Syre Peres of Prydie and Purnele of Flaundres,  
An hayward, an heremyte, the hangeman of Tybourne,  
Dawe the dikere, with a dosoyne harlots  
Of portours and of pikeporses and of pilede toth-draweres,  
A rybibour and a ratoner, a rakeare and his knaue,  
A ropere and a redyng-kyng and Rose the disshere,  
Godefray the garlek-monger and Gryffith the Walshe,  
And of vphalderes an heep, herly by the morwe  
Geuen Glotoun with glad chere good ale to hansull.

Then Glotoun goes in and after him Great Oaths. | Cecily the shoemaker sat on the bench, | Watt the gamekeeper and his drunk wife, | Tim the tinker and two of his boys, | Hick the horseman and Hew the needler, | Clarice of Cock's Lane and the clerk of the church, | Sir Piers of *Pridie* and Purnell of Flanders, | A field keeper, a hermit, the hangman of Tyburn, | Davy the ditcher, with a dozen rogues | [In the form] of bearers and of cutpurses and of hairless toothdrawers, | A minstrel and a rat-catcher, a sweeper and his boy, | A ropemaker and a vassal and Rose the dish-maker, | Geoffrey the garlic-monger and Griffith the Welshman, | And a bunch of peddlers, early in the morning, | With a happy face give good ale as a reward to Glotoun.

PP.VI.361-75

The length and the vividness of this list of characters makes it unique—and not only in the "Confession," but in the entirety of *Piers Plowman*. As Glotoun enters the poem, a whole horde of characters breaks in with him. These are not treated as allegorical personifications, but as unique people; they own not only distinct proper names, but geographic origins ("Flaundres," "Tybourne") and relations of kinship ("his wyf," "his knaues"). All in all, Glotoun differs from every other sin that has spoken in the "Confession" in that he weighs far more on the side of personification than of that

of allegory; more than any other speaker, he belongs to the concrete and particular circumstances in which and for which *Piers Plowman* was composed.

These concrete and particular circumstances coincide with the domain of the vernacular: the terminus of the translations—both *lato sensu* and *stricto sensu*—that are carried out in *Piers Plowman*. Glotoun’s performance contains no Latin outside of a priest’s moniker—*Pridie*—and the name of a prayer—*pater-noster*. Conversely, as I have considered above, both Envy and Covetousness incorporate Latin fragments in their speeches, while Wrath thrives in convents and monasteries where Latin would have been widely known and spoken. Even though Langland includes a “clerc of the church” among the people who sit with Glotoun, one may safely assume that very few of the other patrons gathered at “Betene hous” would have understood Latin.

By turning Glotoun into a figure for vernacular translation, Langland casts a grim light on this practice. In *Piers Plowman*, the sin of gluttony is treated not only as a socially contemptible vice, but as a devastating force. In the third revision, for instance, Langland’s first reference to this transgression occurs with regard to those resources that are “wonne” by industrious laborers: These “playde ful selde” and “swonken ful harde” (‘won,’ ‘played very rarely,’ ‘toiled very hard’) only to see their gains squandered by “wastors” who “with glotony destrueth” (‘wasters,’ ‘destroy with gluttony,’ *PP.Prol.2224*). Gluttony “destreueth”: it obliterates resources that have been acquired with effort and that should be shared by all. For Langland, gluttony always denotes a subtraction, an impoverishment, a loss. While covetousness manifests itself in the withholding of goods, gluttony happens when goods simply dissipate—not kept under lock, but ingested. So, for instance, when Dame Studie condemns the wealthy who “in glotonye forglotten here godes | And breketh nat here bred to the pore” (‘in gluttony gobble up their goods | And do not break their bread to [share it with] the poor,’ *PP.XI.64-65*), the gravity of their behavior lies not only in their lack of charity, but in the depletion of “godes” they do not need. In the “Confession,” the reader is invited to picture a

version of gluttony that eats away the “godes” of language. Before introducing Glotoun into this section, Langland has drawn attention to the mouth as a fountainhead of sin; has established the figure of words as food; has highlighted how language can materially affect the subject and propagate sin within a community. The exchange involving Yeuan and Robert has placed emphasis on how “glosen” can either enable or inhibit the “restitucioun” of knowledge that behooves a clerk. Glotoun evokes “glosen” by paronomasia, and it embodies it as a figure of vernacular translation: a “sin of the tongue” that devours the meaning that one should expound, and that squanders knowledge, morality, and truthfulness. Glotoun represents those clerks who fail to *reddere* the knowledge that they have acquired, not only does by keeping the “coffre of Cristis tresor” well shut, but by dissipating the truthfulness and morality of the precepts that lie inside.

Glotoun’s performance in the “Confession” centers on this dissipation. A great deal of the narrative revolves around the playing of a game—known as “the newe fayre”—that may at first seem extraneous to the destructive consumption usually associated with gluttony. As the game unfolds, however, we discover all the features of a transaction that deserves the designation of gluttonous: an exchange that produces no returns, but only impoverishment and loss. In the third revision of *Piers Plowman*, this game also serves to echo the figure of the losing “bargayn” that Langland has used in the conclusion of Will’s apologia. So, the gluttonous transaction of the “newe fayre” is implicitly assimilated to the lack of *reddere* that Will has lamented in himself and in other clerks like him—the lack of *reddere* that Langland has associated with vernacular translation.

During the “newe fayre” recounted in his performance, Glotoun receives all but returns nothing. Langland mentions twenty-seven people among the patrons gathered at “Betene hous”—not counting the “dosoyne harlots” and the “heep” of peddlers; a colorful list that covers twelve lines, from “Sesse the souhteres” to “Gryffith the Walshe.” This whole crowd of subjects leads up to a single verb: “Geuen.” Twenty-seven people, along with a “heep” more, all give “Glotoun with glad

chere good ale to hansull.” This wildly asymmetrical “geuen,” by which Glotoun alone consumes all the “hansull” supplied by a diverse party of characters, serves as an eloquent prelude to the game of the “newe fayre.” Now, Langland does not fully articulate the rules of this game; indeed, judging from how the scene unfolds, one could argue that most of them are improvised on the spot. Still, all participants ostensibly agree on the game’s fundamental premise: One player should win everything, the other should win nothing.

Clement the coblere cast of his cloke  
 And to the newe fayre nempnede hit to sull.  
 Hicke the hackenayman hit his hod aftur  
 And bade Bette the bochere ben on his side  
 There were chapmen ychose this chaffare to preyse,  
 That ho-so hadde the hood sholde nat haue the cloke  
 And that the bettere thyng, be arbiteres, bote sholde the worse.  
 Tho rysen vp in rape and rounned togyderes  
 And preisede this pensworth apart by hemselue,  
 And there were othes an heep for on sholde haue the worse.

Clement the cobbler threw away his cloak | And offered to sell it at the new fair. | Then Hick the horseman cast his hood | And begged Betty the butcher to be on his side. | There were traders [who were] chosen to appraise this bargain, | [So] that whoever had the hood should not have the cloak, | And that the better item, according to the judges, should win the worse. | Those [judges] stood up in haste and whispered together | And appraised these pennyworth [items] aside by themselves, | And there were oaths aplenty since one should have the worse.

*PP.VI.376-85*

At the core of the game lies the plainest of exchanges—a “cloke” for a “hod.” Clement, who initiates this transaction, deems it a “sull[ing]”; judging from this verb, he expects to hand his “cloke” over while receiving something in return. With the introduction of Hick’s “hod,” however, the intricacy of the bargain starts ballooning out of proportion. Several mediators intervene: “Bette the bochere,” some “chapmen,” some “arbiteres.” Their excited confabulation, a “rounn[ing] togyderes [...] apart by hemselue,” might recall the business and solemnity of the “confessours” who “couplede hem

togederes” as they construe Latin precepts for the King in Westminster. Yet, these mediators do not intend to make anything clearer; rather, they obfuscate the simple premises of the bargain in order to bring about an imbalance. Indeed, the game does not prioritize victory, but loss. The phrases “sholde the worse” and “on sholde haue the worse,” paired in an emphatic rhyme at the end of two nearly adjacent lines, foreground this imperative: to leave one side “worse” than the other. The development and the conclusion of the “newe fayre” underline the pursuit of this goal.

They couthe nat by here consience acorden for treuthe  
Til Robyn the ropere aryse they bisouhte  
And nempned hym for a noumper that no debat were.  
Hicke the hostiler hadde the clocke  
In couenaunt that Clement sholde the coppe fulle  
And haue Hickes hood the hostiler and holde hym yserued;  
And ho-so repentede hym rathest sholde aryse aftur  
And grete syre Glotoun with a galoun of ale.

They could not by their conscience agree for [the sake of] truth | Until they beseeched Robin the ropemaker to stand up | And nominated him as a mediator [so] that [there] was no debate. | Hick the stableman had the cloak | On condition that Clement should fill the cups | And have Hick the stableman’s hood and deem himself [well] served; | And whoever first repented himself should then stand up | And greet sir Glotoun with a gallon of ale.

*PP.VI.386-93*

The judges’ indecision betrays the perversity of this intent. They cannot “acorden” because none of the two items can be deemed objectively “worse” than the other; in other words, they must create disparity where there is no disparity. As a consequence, as it introduces an arbitrary loss, their mediation cannot conform to “treuthe.” Nobody wins in the end; Clement and Hick do swap a “clocke” for a “hood,” but only if Clement agrees to keep “the coppe fulle” and “holde hym yserued.” So, the trade produces an impoverishment rather than a gain, echoing the endless string of losing bargains lamented by Will in his apologia. It is a gluttonous bargain; and indeed, only Glotoun himself profits from it, quaffing the “galoun of ale” lost by the player who “repentede hym rathest.”

All in all, the great animation of the “newe fayre” boils down to an unfavorable exchange in which no party gains and Glotoun “destreueth” all he can.

There was leyhing and louryng and ‘lat go the coppel’  
Bargaynes and beuerages bygan tho to awake,  
And seten so til euensong and songen vmbwhyte  
Til Glotoun hadde yglobbed a galoun and a gylle.

There was laughing and scowling and ‘let the cup go [round]!’ | Bargains and  
beverages began to arouse them, | And thus they sat until vespers and sung  
afterwards | Until Glotoun had gulped down a gallon and a gill.

PP.VI.376-96

The conclusion of the scene implies that several analogous transactions come after Clement and Hick’s exchange. These lines reproduce the effect of the colorful catalogue of characters that I have cited above, followed by the single predicate “Geuen Glotoun.” The patrons’ rowdy activity—the “leyhing and louryng,” the proliferation of “beuerages,” the time spent in “seten” and “songen”—all culminates in the “galoun and a gylle” that “Glotoun hadde yglobbed.” Like Will’s persistent “[c]haffar[en]” in the apologia, the losing “Bargaynes” of the “newe fayre” seem to perpetuate themselves, constantly expanding the size of the loss embodied by Glotoun.

I have argued that Glotoun embodies the loss of meaning involved in the “glosen” of vernacular translation. Because of the irreducible differences between the two languages, vernacular translation cannot aspire to *reddere* the full extent of knowledge, morality and truthfulness conveyed by a Latin text. This causes the contrition displayed by Will in the apologia; like a merchant who makes an endless string of losing bargains, he cannot return the resources that he has acquired and that he should share with others. As a “sin of the tongue,” Glotoun personifies this lack of return or “restitucioun.” Indeed, the narrative section of his performance ends with a sequence of bodily “restitucioun[s]” that return to others a grossly impoverished version of what he has acquired.

Langland's attention in this conclusion is divided between the revolting gases and fluids that pour out of Glotoun's body and the inertness of the body itself, turned into a dumb, heavy shell.

His gottes gan to gothly as two grydy sowes;  
A pissede a potel in a pater-noster whyle,  
A blew his rownd ruet at his rygebones ende,  
That alle that herde the horne helde here nose aftur [...]  
And when he drow to the dore thenne dymmede his yes;  
A thromblede at the thresfold and threw to the erthe,  
And Clement the coblere cauhte hym by the myddel  
For to lyfte hym aloft and leyde hym on his knees.  
Ac Gloton was a greet cherl and greued in the luftyng  
And cowed vp a caudel in Clementis lappe;  
Is none so hungry hound in Hertfordshyre  
Durst lape of that lyuyng, so vnlovely hit smauchte.

His guts started to rumble like two ravenous sows; | He pissed half a gallon in the span of a pater-noster, | He blew his round trumpet at the end of his spine, [So] that all who heard the horn held their nose afterwards [...] | And then, when he got to the door, his eyes dimmed; | He stumbled at the threshold and collapsed to the ground, | And Clement the cobbler caught him by the middle | In order to lift him upward and put him on his knees. | But Glotoun was a large fellow and weighed [him down] in [being] lift[ed], | And coughed up a hot stew in Clement's lap; | There is no hound so hungry in [all of] Hertfordshire | That would dare lap from that nourishment—it tasted so foul.

PP.VI.398-414

The hyperbolic evacuations that Langland recounts in this passage imitate sounds, drinks, and food that people would ordinarily receive with pleasure: the blowing of a “ruet,” the pouring of a “potel,” the recitation of a “*pater-noster*,” and the dishing out of a “caudel.” These terms usually denote meaningful human expressions and appetizing fares that could be consumed as part of one’s “lyuyng.” Around Glotoun’s body, however, they become euphemisms for farts, piss, and vomit. Langland underlines this devaluation by playing up the disgust of those who witness Glotoun’s physiological meltdown; the “horne” makes people “helde here nose aftur,” while the “caudel” stinks so much that “no hungry hound” would dare “lape” it up. Glotoun “destreuth” their value, in the

same way that he turns the “*pater-noster*” into a mere unit of time; a sequence of meaningless words uttered to quantify the duration of a piss. He ultimately robs words and food of their function, discharging only wasted and emptied receptacles in their stead. His own body is also emptied of power and sensation; his sight “dymmede” and he “threw to the erthe,” inanimate and speechless like a large and heavy object. Remarkably, the task of “lyft[ing] hym aloft” and carrying his dumb weight falls on “Clement the coblere,” the same patron who started the “newe fayre” by trying to “sull” his “cloke.” The weight that now “greued” him corresponds to that of his own loss; the profit he has made amounts to the puddle of vomit now “cowed vp” in his “lappe.” Glotoun’s performance ends with this twisted “restitucioun,” in which the character who made the bargain receives only waste in return.

## CONCLUSION

As a figure for vernacular translation, Glotoun’s performance in the “Confession” encapsulates one side of Langland’s profoundly ambivalent attitude towards this practice. In the third revision of *Piers Plowman*, this scene complements Reason’s exposition of the distinction between “relacion rect and indirect,” which indicates the existence of insurmountable differences between Latin and English. It also echoes the display of contrition that brings Will’s apologia to a close, as the poet confesses the constant losses associated with his vocation and his inability to *reddere* the knowledge that he should share with others. Thus, vernacular translation is deemed gluttonous because it inevitably entails a loss of meaning and an impoverishment in the truthfulness and morality of a statement. As such, it constitutes an imperfect instrument for clerks, whose responsibility remains that of expounding and implementing the knowledge that they receive from scriptural and Latin authorities. However, Langland also admits that a clerk like him cannot entirely refrain from vernacular translation, which is often treated as a necessary practice in the poem. By

translating Latin precepts into the vernacular, clerks can not only enlighten unlearned members of their community, but they can also turn the knowledge that they have acquired into concrete and specific injunctions that relate to the lived experience of their audience. From this standpoint, the shift from received knowledge into “kynde knowyng,” one of Langland’s main concerns in *Piers Plowman*, can be regarded as a form of vernacular translation *lato sensu*. All in all, Langland is left with a contradiction: Vernacular translation serves a necessary purpose, but by producing a loss.

Figuring vernacular translation as gluttony does not resolve this contradiction. Nevertheless, this figure may serve to indicate a practical criterion to distinguish between its sinful and its admissible uses: namely, the criterion of necessity. For Langland, people commit the sin of gluttony whenever their consumption is not motivated by pure hunger or thirst. Gluttony happens as soon as one eats or drinks out of desire; as soon as one steps beyond the threshold of sheer necessity. Langland illustrates this principle in an episode that involves the personification of Hunger, who afflicts a group of peasants during a famine (*PP.VIII.302-320*). As soon as the peasants manage to gather enough food to pacify Hunger, Glotoun pops up: “And thenne were folke fayn and fedde Hunger dentiesliche | And thenne Gloton with gode ale garte Hunger slepe” (“And then people were happy and fed Hunger daintily | And then Glotoun with good ale made Hunger sleep’ *PP.VIII.322-23*). The sin of Glotoun awakes as soon as the necessity of Hunger becomes dormant. I sense that this measure could also be applied to the domain of vernacular translation. Vernacular translation may serve to appease the essential craving for knowledge and enlightenment felt by the unlearned. It may be used to share indispensable precepts and to expound core directives and beliefs. The King needs a translation to ensure that “*bonum malum*” is “*irremuneratum*,” while the crowd of commoners needs one to learn about those “*qui bona egerunt*.” Yet, the vernacular can never aspire to replace Latin beyond this threshold. As soon as this essential need is met, a clerk ought to bring vernacular

translation to an end and to resort to multilingualism:<sup>17</sup> the juxtaposition and synergy of Latin and English that Langland deploys far more frequently in *Piers Plowman*.<sup>18</sup> Rather than a loss, this juxtaposition of languages alone can produce a gain.

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of multilingualism in Middle English literature, see Robert M. Stein, “Multilingualism,” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23–37 and Christopher Baswell, “Multilingualism on the Page,” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38–50.

<sup>18</sup> For an account of the function of this linguistic synergy between Latin and English in *Piers Plowman*, see Johnson, “*Piers Plowman* and social likeness.”

# DON CARNAL'S PERPETUAL STRUGGLE: INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION IN THE *LIBRO DE BUEN AMOR*

In the previous three chapters I have argued that the devotional writers of the 14<sup>th</sup> century deployed figurative language to develop and convey theories of translation that challenged the seemingly ubiquitous model of Jerome's "sensus" and "verbum." The authors that I have considered regarded translation as a transformative process; they claimed that the "sensus" and "verbum" of a text could not be transferred from one language to another without undergoing an inevitable change. Each one of the works that I have analyzed so far attributes different connotations to this change. For Dante, the imperfections and the corruptibility that characterize the vernacular—particularly as opposed to Latin—make it more suitable for his description and praise of God's order. For the poet of *Cleanness*, scriptural translation involves an expansion that can be beneficial for the reader, as it amplifies the effects of the original text and guides worshipers towards an orthodox understanding of God's Word. For Langland, translation from Latin into the vernacular entails an inevitable loss, which can be tolerated only as far as it is warranted by necessity. Despite these differences, all these writers share the same set of basic figures. They all figure the Latin text as a meal that is offered at a banquet, and they all figure translation as a form of consumption. Moreover, they all return to gluttony as a figure for the limitations of vernacular translation.

For all these writers, the vernacular translation of Scripture serves as the quintessential example for the analysis of the necessities, advantages, and risks involved in translation. Scripture was thought to pose the greatest challenge to translators because of its exceptional semantic comprehensiveness. As Bonaventure argued in the prologue to his *Breviloquium*, Scripture was

represented an immense space that could welcome all kinds of readers: more and less sophisticated, perceptive, or aware.

Also, the hearers of this doctrine are not all of one kind, but are of all types—for every person who would be saved should know something of it. Therefore, Scripture has a manifold meaning so that it may win over every mind, meeting each at its own level while remaining superior to all, illuminating and setting afire with shafts of love every mind that searches it with care.<sup>1</sup>

Scripture constituted an extraordinary case, and the example to which all these writers returned in their meditations on translation, because its pages multiplied the number of *sensi* and *verba* that a translator should attempt to carry from one context to another. Nevertheless, between the 12th and the 13th century the exegetical attention that had been previously reserved for biblical texts alone was first extended to classical works—such as Ovid or Virgil—and then to contemporary vernacular writers—such as Dante or, later, Boccaccio.<sup>2</sup> Passages like Marie de France’s “Prolog” to her *Lais*, where she demands a scrupulous listener who could “gloser la letre | E de lur sen le surplus mettre” (“interpret the letter | and supply the rest through their understanding”),<sup>3</sup> can be consequently understood as claims to the same semantic complexity and exegetical challenge posed by Scripture. In other words, the vernacular writers of the late Middle Ages came to openly acknowledge that the semantic complexity and comprehensiveness of Scripture could characterize their own texts as well. Therefore, the challenges of translation would apply not only to the interpretation and adaptation of Scripture—but to the reception of vernacular texts themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> St Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, ed. Dominic Monti and Robert J. Karris, 1st edition (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Inst Pubs, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> This change is extensively discussed in A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Translation*, ed. Claire M. Waters, Broadview Editions (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), 48-49.

In this chapter I argue that this new attitude towards vernacular translation constitutes one of the main preoccupations of the *Libro de Buen Amor*, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Castilian poem which is generally attributed to the Archpriest of Hita Juan Ruiz, its seemingly fictitious first-person narrator. For the most part, this long and labyrinthine work reads as Juan Ruiz's repetitive and meandering autobiography: It concentrates on the frustrating sexual escapades of an inveterate sinner who tries to woo numberless women with the aid of various go-betweens, letters, and songs. Nevertheless, under the guise of this monotonous narrative frame, the book comprises a vast number of heterogeneous inset stories and digressions. The manifold dialogues involving the Archpriest and his acquaintances—the women he tries to seduce and the procuresses who assist him—often turn into sprawling storytelling competitions, in which bits drawn from several sources are adapted and repurposed. In short, we can read the *Libro* both as a fictive autobiography and as a collection of stories—not unlike the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Decameron*, or the Arabic frame narratives which likely inspired its structure.<sup>4</sup> Through these heterogenous stories, the *Libro* constantly experiments with adaptation and translation. Its Castilian stanzas contain—among others—translations of animal fables drawn from the widespread Latin collection known as *Romulus*; erotic plots drawn from popular elegiac comedies, such as the *Pamphilus de amore*; allegorical visions drawn from multiple Latin and vernacular treatises, such as the French *Bataille de Caresme et de Carnage*.<sup>5</sup> From a formal

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<sup>4</sup> The literature on the Arabic influences that informed the *Libro* is regrettably scarce, but it has expanded in recent years. For a recent contribution on the frame narratives that might have inspired the author, see James Monroe, “Arabic Literary Elements in the Structure of the Libro De Buen Amor (II),” *Al-Qanṭara* 32 (December 15, 2011): 307–32. Monroe argues that, while the contents of the *Libro* belong to the Western tradition, its overall structure is derived from Arabic works that circulated widely in Iberia—works such as *Sendebār* or the *Book of Kalila wa-Dimna*.

<sup>5</sup> Given the literary voracity of the work itself, the investigation on the many different sources to which the *Libro* might allude seems potentially endless. For instance, several vernacular sources have been identified by John K. Walsh, “Juan Ruiz and the ‘Mester de Clerezía’: Lost Context and Lost Parody in the ‘Libro de Buen Amor,’” *Romance Philology* 33, no. 1 (1979): 62–86. Other fables and tales might be based on a Latin Pseudo-Ovidian Art of Love known as *Facetus*, as explained by José M. Martínez Torrejón, “El Libro de Buen Amor y Un Manual de Cortesía: El Facetus ‘Moribus et Vita,’” *Anuario de Letras. Lingüística y Filología* 25 (1987): 65–90. Juan Ruiz's peculiar treatment of Latin and vernacular sources is examined in Bienvenido Morros, “Nuevas Fuentes de ‘El Libro de Buen Amor,’” *Romance Philology* 55, no. 2 (2002): 231–60. For a recent overview on this subject, see Barry Taylor, “Exempla and Proverbs in the Libro de Buen Amor,” in *A Companion to the Libro de Buen Amor*, ed. Louise M. Haywood and Louise O. Vasvári, Colección Támesis. Serie A, Monografías 209 (Rochester, N.Y.: Tamesis, 2004).

standpoint, the *Libro* adapts and repurposes a stanza that 14<sup>th</sup>-century readers would have found solemn and old-fashioned: the *cuaderna vía* used for the epic matter of the *Libro de Alexandre* and for the religious works composed by Gonzalo de Berceo. Finally, the *Libro* itself was adapted and repurposed several times. The original work was composed by the alleged Juan Ruiz in the year 1330, then revised by the same author a few years later. Nevertheless, the most extensive manuscript in our possession, and the one that I discuss in this chapter, was copied in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century by a scribe who in all likelihood added his own revisions to the text, including a prologue in prose and various religious songs.<sup>6</sup> Like *Piers Plowman*, the *Libro* deals with *translatio sensu lato*: with the question of how preexistent forms and contents can be adapted and repurposed into different contexts.

This chapter argues that the *Libro de Buen Amor* deploys figures of consumption to address the question of translation, but that it does so to advance a more radical argument than the one proposed by Dante, *Cleanness*, or Langland. Juan Ruiz figures the experience of reading the *Libro* as that of a banquet; he figures reading as a form of consumption and gluttony as a form of interpretive transgression. Yet, the *Libro* extends the theoretical scope of these figures, turning the challenge to Jerome's model of "sensus" and "verbum" into a more fundamental profession of doubt about the effectiveness of any kind of linguistic exchange. While the figures deployed by Dante, the *Cleanness*-poet, and Langland suggested that no translation can reliably convey the "sensus" of a text, those of the *Libro* argue that no text can reliably convey a stable "sensus"—that all communication involves the same inevitable change in meaning that characterizes vernacular translation. Faced with this failure of language, the *Libro* ultimately argues that any translation—and, as a consequence, any

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<sup>6</sup> This is the so-called Manuscript S—where S stands for the city where it was copied and preserved, Salamanca. It was copied by the archbishop Alonso de Paradinas. For a brief introduction to this manuscript and its author, see Ramón Menéndez Pidal, "Un Copista Ilustre Del Libro de Buen Amor y Dos Redacciones de Esta Obra," in *Poesía Árabe y Poesía Europea* (Madrid: Espasa, 1963), 145–50. For a classical survey of the philological problems posed by the *Libro*, see Alberto Blecuá, "Los problemas filológicos del 'Libro de Buen Amor,'" *Insula*, no. 488–489 (January 1987): 38–39. The essential study on the manuscript history of the *Libro* remains John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the "Libro de Buen Amor"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

linguistic exchange—should be regarded as an endlessly tentative process. Translation inevitably entails an infinite series of victories and setbacks—we approach the truest meaning of the original text only temporarily, before losing sight of it again and again. Because of these limitations, the *Libro* underlines the ethical importance of individual choice in this process. Faced with the inevitable challenges and ambiguities of language, a reader must choose one interpretation among many—even though one knows that this choice cannot last for long.

The figures of the *Libro* that I will examine in this chapter are used to convey the various propositions that comprise this complex theory of language, translation, and interpretation. In what follows, I will explain how the *Libro* draws these figures from one of its most pervasive—yet unacknowledged—intertexts: Augustine’s *Confessions*. As he writes his profane, twisted version of *Confessions*, Juan Ruiz adapts and repurposes a series of figurative elements found in Augustine’s autobiography: among these, the figure of wine and intoxication; the figure of sweetness; and the figure of fasting as a kind of endless battle. Each one of these figures is used to highlight or convey one aspect of Juan Ruiz’s theory of translation and language. Through the figure of wine and intoxication, the *Libro* argues that interpretation unfolds as an endlessly tentative process, since it inevitably involves a virtually infinite sequence of contradictory setbacks and accomplishments. Through the figure of sweetness, the *Libro* zeroes in on the cause of this unfinishedness, by demonstrating how language is characterized by a frustrating ambiguity. Finally, through the figure of fasting as a battle, the *Libro* directs the audience’s attention towards the individual choices that can determine the overall meaning of a text, and argues that readers, interpreters, and translators must embrace their responsibility to choose.

In short, the *Libro de Buen Amor* argues that all reading unfolds as a kind of translation; as a deliberate adaptation of the original text, shaped by the choices made by the audience. The poem explicitly invites this identification between reading and translation. In the first section of the book,

for instance, Juan Ruiz asks the audience to model their response to the *Libro* while keeping in mind the quintessential example of *translatio studii*: the transfer of knowledge from the people of Greece to the people of Rome.<sup>7</sup>

Entiende bien mis dichos e piensa la sentençia;  
non me contesca contigo como al doctor de Greçia  
con el ribal romano e su poca sabiençia,  
quando demandó Roma a Grecia la çiençia.

Understand my sayings well and think about the meaning; | may I not receive  
from you [the treatment that] the scholar from Greece | [received from] the  
Roman rogue and his little wisdom, when Rome demanded science from  
Greece.

*LBA*, 46<sup>8</sup>

The episode that the poet proceeds to retell upends the straightforward quality that so many texts tended to attribute to the *translatio* of learning in classical antiquity—the lightness that characterizes, for instance, the lines from *Cligès* that I considered in the introduction to this dissertation. In the story, the Greeks decide to test the Romans’ ability to understand their teachings before they proceed to impart them. In order to do so, they organize a public test where a representative from the Greeks interrogates a representative from the Romans. Nevertheless, since the two peoples do not share a common spoken language, the exchange happens through gestures. So, the Greek representative makes signs that, in his intention, should serve as questions about theology: They concern the nature and the power of God. But the Roman representative understands these signs as invitations to a fight, and responds with signs that, in his intention, should serve as similarly violent provocations: a

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<sup>7</sup> For a recent analysis of this episode and its relation to medieval theories of language, see Vincent Barletta, “The Greeks and the Romans: Language and the Pragmatics of Performance in the ‘Libro de Buen Amor,’” *Hispanic Review* 80, no. 3 (2012): 349–70. An argument concerning the literary theory exemplified through this story has been advanced in Priscilla Meléndez, “Una Teoría de La Escritura En El ‘Libro de Buen Amor’ de Juan Ruiz, Arcipreste de Hita,” *Hispanic Journal* 4, no. 1 (1982): 87–95.

<sup>8</sup> All citations from the *Libro* are from Juan Ruiz, *Libro de Buen Amor*, ed. Alberto Blecua, Letras Hispánicas 70 (Madrid: Catedra, 1992), and followed by my own paraphrases.

fist, a poke in the eyes and the mouth, a slap in the face. The Greek, however, misunderstands these gestures and interprets them as adequate answers to his theological questions: The fist would indicate God's power over the world, the poke in the eye and the mouth would indicate the Trinity, and so on. At the end, even though they have completely misunderstood each other, the Greeks agree to pass on their learning, and the process of *translatio studii* begins. So, the story establishes that understanding the *Libro* and reflecting on its meaning should happen as a form of translation—the adaptation of a foreign sign into a familiar language. But the *Libro* also warns its audience that this translation will always entail setbacks and mistakes—no matter how successful it might ultimately seem.

## I. CONFESIONS OF A DRUNKARD

The *Libro de Buen Amor* asks us that we treat it as a translation, and it often takes the form of a translation. It translates and adapts several preexistent sources, collected within the same frame narrative. Of all these sources, the most pervasive ones are perhaps those that Juan Ruiz never acknowledges, such as the writings of Augustine. Critics have successfully proven that the *Libro* derives much of its theological, exegetical, and psychological framework from the treatises of Augustine—particularly *De Doctrina Christiana* and *De Trinitate*. Yet, the work that seems to have affected the *Libro* most profoundly remains Augustine's seminal autobiography, the *Confessions*. In *The Status of the Reading Subject in the Libro de Buen Amor*, Marina S. Brownlee proposes that the *Confessions* functions as a fundamental intertext for the *Libro*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, both texts revolve around the moral and religious lives of their respective first-person narrators—the historically undisputed Augustine of Hippo and the historically improbable Juan Ruiz of Hita. Both men struggle with temptations and

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<sup>9</sup> Marina Scordilis Brownlee, *The Status of the Reading Subject in the Libro de Buen Amor* (Chapel Hill: Distributed by University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

sins, especially with carnal ones; both strive to orient their thoughts and their choices towards the goal of theological observance. Moreover, Brownlee adds, both works are founded on the exercise of a specific mental function: memory; and both seem to combine a narrative premise with a pedagogical end—namely, to offer a model of good reading. Yet, besides its narrative structure and some of its most conspicuous thematic strands, the *Libro* owes to *Confessions* the figures that I will consider in the rest of this chapter. In the same way that the Dante of *Purgatorio* alluded to and then adapted and developed figures that had appeared in his previous works, the *Libro* appropriates the figures of *Confessions*, and alters them in order to convey its theory of translation and interpretation.

### THE FIGURE OF WINE IN *CONFESIONS*

Through the figures that it draws from *Confessions*, the *Libro* articulates its theoretical approach to the issues posed by translation and language. As a consequence, these theories often emerge as responses to the narrative of *Confessions*; they stand out because they contrast with the approach advanced by Augustine. The figure that best exemplifies this contrast, and the first one that I intend to discuss, is that of wine and intoxication. In *Confessions*, inebriation can appear as either a state of spiritual bliss or as one of immorality. At times, for instance, Augustine praises the “sobriam vini ebrietatem” (‘sober inebriation of wine,’ V.13.23)<sup>10</sup> that can be derived from the predication of God’s truth. Elsewhere, instead, he laments the “vinulentia [...] de vino invisibili” (‘the drunkenness of an invisible wine’ II.3.6) which turns people away from this truth. The former kind of inebriation—the divine one—is often associated with the beatitude that awaits one in the hereafter. For instance, when, after his death, his friend Nebridius reaches the intoxicating bliss of the afterlife, his soul explicitly “ponit [...] spirituale os ad fontem tuum et bibit, quantum potest, sapientiam”

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<sup>10</sup> All citations from *Confessions* are taken from Augustine, *Confessions. Books 1-8*, ed. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, Loeb Classical Library 26 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), and followed by my own paraphrases.

(‘places his spiritual mouth by [God’s] spring, and drinks knowledge as much as he can’). Moreover, even though Nebridius will “inebriari” (‘become inebriated’), Augustine clarifies that he forgets nothing, because he “Domin[um] potat” (‘drinks the Lord,’ IX.3.6). These allusions to the “sobria ebrietas” of scriptural and heavenly knowledge (‘sober drunkenness’),<sup>11</sup> conformed to a widely attested Christian trope, whose orthodoxy was corroborated by renown evangelical passages, among which are included the wedding at Cana (*John* 2:10) and the epistles of Paul (*Eph.* 5.18; *Gal.* 5). Conversely, Augustine’s references to the consumption of wine as sinful—both figuratively and literally—come across as vivid and original narrative inventions. His mother’s exemplary righteousness, for instance, is illustrated by two episodes that involve her “vinulentia” (‘passion for wine’). First, her contrition for a secret “crimen” (‘transgression’), committed in her childhood; unbeknownst to her family, she chugged “plenos mero caliculos” (‘small cups full of pure wine’), until an onlooker called her “meribibulam” (‘drunkard,’ IX.8.17). Second, her compliance with one of Ambrose’s prohibitions, later in her life, when—“pie atque obedienter” (‘piously and obediently,’ VI.2.2)—she avoided drinking a “pocillum” (‘little cup’) of wine at the cemetery. Unlike the references to the “sobria ebrietas,” these episodes cannot be explained by simply considering Augustine’s adherence to a fixed rhetorical tradition; rather, they are treated as figures—episodes of his life, vividly retold, that are likened to spiritual conditions without losing their literal specificity.

Through this meditation on some of the events narrated in his autobiography, Augustine turns the consumption of wine, and its fleeting or lasting effects, into a figure of moral obfuscation. Augustine often associates the alluring confusion provoked by an intoxicating drink with the deceitful impressions left by the fallacious arguments of poets, rhetoricians, heretics. While

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of “sobria ebrietas” and its foundations in patristic writing, see Rebecca Lemon, *Addiction and Devotion in Early Modern England*, Haney Foundation Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). The figure became a favorite of Dominican writers, as examined in Paul Murray, “Drunk on Wisdom St Thomas Aquinas and St Catherine of Siena,” *Angelicum* 82, no. 3 (2005): 637–49.

describing the Latin lessons of his childhood, for instance, he bemoans the “vinum erroris” (‘wine of error’) poured “ab ebris doctoribus” (‘by drunken teachers’) in the “vasa electa atque pretiosa” (‘chosen and precious glasses,’ I.16.26) of the language; in other words, the depraved and superstitious stories of writers like Terence, taught to aid the memorization of classical grammar and vocabulary. A similar image is evoked to retell his encounter with Faustus, the celebrated spiritual leader of the Manicheans; this disappointing theologian is likened to a “decentissimus ministrator” (‘very becoming waiter’) who stirs his audience with the contents “pretiosiorum poculorum” (‘of precious chalices’), but who cannot quench the protagonist’s spiritual “sitim” (‘thirst,’ V.6.10). In what follows, I will discuss how these depictions of deceitful orators as pourers of an intoxicating wine certainly influence the poet of the *Libro*.

Yet, the most consequential use of wine as a figure in the *Confessions* does not treat intoxication as a fleeting consequence of persuasive speech, but as a lasting addiction to vice. Augustine devotes a large section of Book VI to the examination of his own vices, particularly lust, alongside the exposition of those that afflict his friend Alypius, who develops a fondness for gladiator games; these habitual transgressions are repeatedly compared with drinking. This section—which, as I have mentioned above, opens with his mother’s pious and obedient consent to abstain from wine in the cemetery—relates the different yet convergent subjections to sin that constrain the protagonist and his friends. Despite their education and their good intentions, and despite their exposure to the truthful doctrines preached by Ambrose, the narrator and his companions remain tied to the errors of Manicheanism, and to their respective vices. To illustrate their common condition, Augustine likens it to that of a drunken beggar whom they see in the street.

... cum pararem recitare imperatori laudes, quibus plura mentiter, [...],  
transiens per quendam vicum Mediolanensem animadverti pauperem  
mendicum iam, credo, saturum iocantem atque laentatem. Et ingemui et  
locutus sum cum amicis, qui mecum erant, multos dolores insaniarum  
nostrarum, quia omnibus talibus conatibus nostris, qualibus tum laborabam,

sub stimulis cupiditatum trahens infelicitatis meam sarcinam ex trahendo exaggerans, nihil vellemus aliud nisi ad securam laetitiam pervenire, quo nos mendicus ille iam praecessisset numquam illuc fortasse venturos. Quod enim iam ille pauculis et emendicatis nummulis adeptus erat, ad hoc ego tam aerumnosis anfractibus et circuitibus ambiebam, ad laetitiam scilicet temporalis felicitatis. [...] Nam sicut verum gaudium non erat, ita nec illa vera gloria et amplius vertebat mentem meam. Et ille ipsa nocte digesturus erat ebrietatem suam, ego cum meam dormieram et surrexeram et durmiturus et surrecturus eram; vide quot dies!

... as I was preparing to deliver praises of the emperor, by which I would have lied many times, [...] walking through a certain alley in Milan, I noticed a poor beggar, [whom] I believe [was] already full [of wine, and he was] joking and rejoicing. And I sighed and I discussed with my friends, who were with me, the many pains of our insanities, because with all those attempts of ours— such as the ones [for] which I was suffering then, carrying my burden of unhappiness under the prick of desire, enlarging [it] by carrying [it]—we wanted nothing else besides reaching a secure joy, at which that beggar of ours had already preceded us; there, where perhaps we would never arrive. Indeed, what he had reached with very few solicited coins—for that I strived through such wretched bends and turns; namely, for the joy of temporal happiness. [...] Because, just as [his] was not true bliss, so [mine] was not real glory, and turned my mind further [away from it]. And he would have dissipated his drunkenness on that same night, while I with mine had slept and had awoken, and [still with it] I would have slept and I would have awoken; see how many days!

*Conf.*, VI.7.10-11

The pursuit of “laetitiam [...] temporalis felicitatis” becomes an endless “ebrietas” from which the “amic[us]” can seem to find no remedy; an obnubilation that “vert[et]” them far from the “vera gloria” of God, and without ever even placating their material “cupiditat[em]” in the first place. In the pages that follow, Augustine delineates the various manifestations of this drunkenness. For instance, having glimpsed the spillage of blood in the arena for the first time, Alypius “ebibit” (“drank up”) its “immanitatem” (“monstrousness”) and “cruenta voluptate inebriatur” (“became drunk with the bloody pleasure,” VI.8.13). On his part, as a professional orator and teacher of rhetoric, remunerated for “plura ment[is],” Augustine equates himself to those pourers of intoxicating arguments whom he has denigrated earlier.

Indeed, in this section Augustine still insists on the figurative link between the pouring of wine and the delivery of a persuasive speech. At times, a well-constructed speech can mitigate the obnubilating effects of vice. For instance, when Augustine and Alypius become friends, the latter is still confining most of his enthusiasm “vanorum ludorum caeco et precipiti studio” (‘to the blind and hasty love of vain games’). On this occasion, Augustine deploys his speech to free his companion; having heard the orator’s convincing condemnation of the arena, Alypius “post illa verba proripuit se ex fovea tam alta, qua libenter demergebatur et cum mira voluptate caecabatur” (‘after those words, dragged himself away from that deep pit, where he was willingly being submerged, and [where] he was being blinded with a marvelous pleasure’). In other words, Augustine’s eloquent “verba” put an end to the moral blindness and the intellectual confinement caused by his friend’s vice. However, Augustine’s persuasive speech can also serve the opposite purpose. First, as soon as he resolves to “audire” (‘hearing’) Augustine’s lessons, Alypius “superstitione involutus est” (‘was involved by the superstition,’ VI.7.12) of the Manicheans, eloquently commended by the friend. Second, when the two friends debate their divergent positions on sexual abstinence, which Alypius has observed since his youth and which Augustine categorically rejects, the argument is won by the latter.

In this particular circumstance, the voice of the narrator—the present-day Augustine who delivers his confession—underlines the difference that exists between him and the protagonist of the autobiography. Even though the narrator—present-day Augustine—now knows how he lived “deligatus morbo carnis mortifera suavitate” (‘tied to the disease of the flesh through deadly sweetness’) and relates how he “traheba[t] catenam [su]am timens solvi” (‘dragged his chain, afraid of being freed’), the protagonist of the book—pre-conversion Augustine—is portrayed as he persuades his friend to undergo the same submission. Through this speech he binds the friend’s good will and understanding—he manages to “sparge[re] per linguam [...] dulces laqueos” (‘spread through the tongue [...] sweet nooses,’ VI.12.21). So, Augustine first deploys his persuasive speech to free his

friend from the addictive sin “vanorum ludorum.” Afterwards, however, the same instrument yokes both him and Alypius to the “mortifera suavitas” of sexual desire. As a consequence, in the penitential narrative of *Confessions*, the figure of inebriation serves to illuminate how sin can be either encouraged or hindered through a persuasive speech. Sinful thoughts and fallacious convictions are poured into the “vasa electa” of finely wrought rhetorical language, and they are meant to “demerg[ere]” and “caec[are]” those who consume them, prompting them to seek the same deceitful temporal “laetitia” again and again.

When speech encourages it, the inebriation of vice becomes a sort of addiction from which one can hardly escape. The aforementioned synesthesia of the “dulces laqueos”—which extend from Augustine’s “lingua” to “illi honesti expediti pedes implic[are]” (‘entangle [Alypius’s] honorable and unimpeded feet,’ *ibid.*)—conflates the figure of wine with a different figure, ubiquitous in both *Confessions* and the *Libro*: that of captivity. Describing his incapacity to abstain from sex, Augustine recounts how “consuetudo satiandae insatiabilis concupiscentiae [illum] captum excruciat” (‘the habit of having to sate an insatiable desire tortured him as a prisoner,’ VI.12.22).<sup>12</sup> This conflation culminates in the sections of *Confessions* that detail the protagonist’s conversion. Here Augustine merges the figure of captivity with his theory of the “two wills,” according to which one should acknowledge “duas voluntates in homine uno” (‘two wills in a single man,’ VIII.10.24). To clarify, in the first part of *Confessions*, Augustine—“obstrictus dura servitus” (‘fettered through a harsh slavery’)—feels the “catenam” (‘chain’) with which “libido,” “consuetudo,” and “necessitas” (‘pleasure,’ ‘habit,’ ‘need’ VIII.5.24) bind him. During the intense meditation that leads to his conversion, the narrator realizes that both the warden who holds this “catenam” and the prisoner whom he detains correspond to two parts of his own soul.

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine’s insightful representation of addiction has been examined in Chris Cook, *Alcohol, Addiction and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics 27 (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Non igitur monstrum partim velle, partim nolle, sed aegritudo animi est, quia non totus assurgit veritate sublevatus, consuetudine praegravatus. Et ideo sunt duae voluntates, quia una earum tota non est et hoc adest alteri, quod deest alteri.

It is not a wonder, then, in part to want, in part not to want; but it is a sickness of the spirit, because it does not rise completely—lifted by truth, encumbered by habit. And therefore there are two wills, because a single one of them is not whole, and what is absent for one, is present for the other.

*Conf.*, VIII.9.21

At the moment of Augustine’s conversion, the “volunt[as]” that strives to rise towards “veritate” takes over the one that pushes towards “consuetudine”; the captive is freed from the chain; the intoxication ends. Indeed, shortly after this moment, as the narrator seeks guidance in the words of Scripture, he stumbles upon Paul’s injunction to stop lingering “in comessationibus et ebrietatibus” (‘in revels and inebriations,’ VIII.12.29; *Rom.* 13). Thus, the figure of intoxication in *Confessions* ultimately comes to represent the condition of vice and spiritual confusion in which Augustine lived before his conversion; a condition encouraged by his and his interlocutors’ persuasive speeches, which kept one of his two wills captive.

#### THE FIGURE OF WINE IN THE *LIBRO DE BUEN AMOR*

The *Libro de Buen Amor* appropriates and adapts every element that characterizes the figure of wine in the *Confessions*. Yet, the changes that Juan Ruiz makes in his treatment of this figure reveal the profound differences that exist between the structure of his book and that of Augustine’s autobiography. Moreover, these differences serve to convey one of the fundamental principles that underlie the unique theory of translation and interpretation that the *Libro* intends to develop: the unfolding of interpretation and translation as endlessly tentative processes.

Still, many of the references to wine that appear in the *Libro* conform to long-established Christian precepts surrounding its consumption.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the poem incorporates variants of widespread sayings that warn against drinking as the cause of further sinning; proverbs like “pan e vino juega, que non camisa nueva” (‘bread and wine titillate more than a new shirt,’ 983b), or “do mucho vino es, | luego es la loxuria e todo mal después” (‘where there is plenty of wine, | then there is lust, and afterwards all sin,’ 296cd). These notions well accord with the representations of gluttony and drunkenness in the penitential manuals of the time. Nevertheless, the *Libro de Buen Amor* combines these customary depictions of drunkenness as the door to all sins with the analogy—drawn from the *Confessions*—between wine and persuasive speech. Towards the end of the poem, for instance, the personification of “vino” is depicted as a silver-tongued warden, who “parlava mucho” (‘talked a lot’) and who seemed “de todos alguaçil” (‘master of all,’ 1096d).

I maintain that this treatment of wine as a figure for tempting speech also pervades a crucial passage that occurs relatively early in the poem: the exchange between the lecherous Juan Ruiz—the protagonist and narrator of the *Libro*—and the personification of Love. In the 180 quatrains that precede this episode, Juan Ruiz has introduced himself and his work, has indicated the principles and methods that should inspire the proper interpretation of his words, and has begun recounting the endless string of unsuccessful seductions that have allegedly marked his life. In particular, he has been rejected by a “dueña cuerda” (‘wise woman,’ 81a)—who has persuasively detailed her reasons for mistrusting his tempting promises; by a lovely baker-girl known as “Cruz la panadera”—who has chosen to fornicate with his go-between instead than with him; and by a “dueña ençerrada” (‘secluded woman,’ 167d)—who has lucidly argued that one should never compromise a high reward, like “Dios” and “su paraíso” (‘God’ and ‘his paradise’), for a low one, like a “pecado del mundo, que

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<sup>13</sup> The many references to wine that appear in the *Libro* have been analyzed in Bienvenido Morros, “Las Propiedades Del Dinero y Del Vino En El Libro de Buen Amor a La Luz de Las Comedias Elegíacas,” *Bulletin Hispanique* 105, no. 1 (2003): 19–50.

es sonbra de aliso” (‘sin of the world, which is [nothing more than] the shadow of an alder,’ 173a). After these three rejections, all followed by effective arguments or musings concerning the frustration caused by the pursuit of earthly pleasures, Juan Ruiz has apparently acknowledged the sinfulness and shortsightedness of his behavior. In a telling adaptation of an Aesopian fable, he compares himself to a “ladrón” (‘burglar’) who tries to silence a “mastín” (‘guard dog’) by throwing a “medio pan” (‘half a loaf’) full of hidden “çaraças” (‘nails,’ 174-175) at him. He explains that the dog cleverly refuses to renounce his master’s benevolence for such an unworthy mouthful; similarly, the women have preferred God’s eternal love to his petty and deceitful offers of carnal pleasure (178). Thus, when the personification of “Amor” (‘Love,’ 181d) appears to him, the narrator is approaching a state of moral lucidity that might prelude a conversion.

Juan Ruiz’s morally lucid state is indeed substantiated in the first part of the debate between him and the personification of Love. This first part consists of a meticulous and extensive speech that the protagonist himself directs against the dangers of carnal love. In more than 240 quatrains, this attack encompasses numerous arguments and fables that are meant to prove the foolishness and immorality of this worldly “Amor,” alongside an exposition of the seven capital vices and their specific effects. In Augustinian terms, this profusion of virtuous claims—devised by a sinner yet in opposition to sin—could correspond to the end of the “ebrietas” that constrains one’s virtuous will. Accordingly, the stanza that introduces both Amor’s apparition and Juan Ruiz’s long reproach insists on the latter’s sobriety.

Dirévos una pelea que una noche me vino,  
pensando en mi ventura, sañudo e non con vino:  
un omne grande, fermoso, mesurado, a mí vino:  
yo le pregunté quién era; dixo: “Amor, tu vezino”.

I will tell you [of] a fight, which happened to me one night, | thinking about  
my fate, angry, and not with wine: | a tall, handsome, mannerly man came to  
me; | I asked him who he was, he said: “Love, your neighbor.”

*LBA*, 181

In the quatrain, a triple *rime riche* concatenates three distinct interpretations of the vocable “vino.” Two correspond to the third person singular of the verb “venir,” conjugated in the past tense: first, in the temporal sense of ‘occurred,’ ‘happened’; then, in the spatial sense of ‘came,’ ‘arrived.’ The third “vino,” inserted between the other two, functions as a noun, meaning ‘wine.’ The semantic negation of this central noun, through the adverb “non,” clashes both with the prosodic stress on the rhyming vocables and with these references to a presence or an apparition, conveyed by the two verbs surrounding it. In other words, Juan Ruiz seems strangely fixated with “vino,” even though no “vino” should appear in this scene.

Yet, the fourth rhyme of the stanza—“vezino”—insinuates a different possibility: that the same character who utters this salutation to Juan Ruiz—“Amor,” of course—should be regarded as a neighbor of “vino,” and perhaps as the one manifestation of “vino” that actually “vino” to Juan Ruiz during this final moment of lucidity. Indeed, Amor’s proximity to intoxication is underlined in the following two quatrains, where the narrator strives to hold on to his sobriety by attempting to materially expel the intrusive “vezino.”

Con saña que tenía fuilo a denostar;  
díxel: “Si Amor eres, non puedes aquí estar:  
eres mentiroso falso en muchos enartar;  
salvar non puedes uno, puedes çient mill matar.

“Con engaños e lisonjas e sotiles mentiras,  
enpoçonas las lenguas, enervolas tus viras;  
al que mejor te sirve, a él fieres quando tiras,  
párteslo del amiga al omne que aíras.

With the anger I had I went to attack him; | I told him: “If you are Love, you cannot stay here: | you are a false liar in deceiving many; | you cannot save one, you can kill hundred[s]. |” With deceits and flatteries and subtle lies, | you intoxicate the tongues, you poison your arrows; | the one who serves you best, he [is the one whom] you wound when you shoot, | you separate from his girlfriend the man [against] whom you rage.

*LBA*, 182-183

The toxicity of the “vino” is now evoked through the two verbs “enervolas” and “enpoçonas,” the latter of which—etymologically derived from the Latin “potior” (“to drink”)—specifically designates a poisonous beverage. Like the aforementioned “dulces laqueos,” stemmed from Augustine’s tongue to restrain the honest free will of his friend Alypius, this poison affects the site of oral articulation and consumption: “las lenguas.” It involves the ingestion of eloquent falsehoods, which are enumerated in a redundant polysyndeton: “engaños e lijonjas e sotiles mentiras.” This falseness serves as the second distinctive feature mentioned by the narrator to characterize the personification of Amor, openly called “mentiroso falso en muchos enartar.” The first feature, cited in the previous stanza, corresponds to his physical attractiveness and courteous countenance, his appearing “grande, fermoso, mesurado.” Turning to *Confessions* again, the antithesis between the deceitfulness of Amor’s intentions and the pleasantness of his appearances recalls Augustine’s complaint against the “vinum erroris” of classical superstition, poured into the “vasa electa atque pretiosa” of Latin rhetoric. Thus, through these allusions to “vino,” Amor embodies the effects of persuasive speeches, which can capture the will of listeners and facilitate their spiritual obfuscation. And, like Alypius, Juan Ruiz himself is ultimately affected by this captivating eloquence. Although he first demonstrates his sobriety by means of his long attack against carnal “Amor,” Amor’s own retort—far shorter—suffices to force him back to his former inebriation.

Therefore, having consumed Amor’s inebriating retort, Juan Ruiz resumes his tragicomically unsuccessful attempts at romantic seduction. Even more alarmingly, he exhibits no recollection of

his previous cogitations as a sober repentant—what he argued while “sañudo e non con vino.” In other words, by delivering about 150 quatrains of persuasive “castigos” (‘teachings,’ 425d), the personification of Love induces the narrator to forget the causes and the contents of his prior virtuous speech. Instead of looking back to the sins and the miseries caused by Amor’s carnality, the narrator remembers “que en sus castigos us[Ø] siempre bevir” (‘that he was always accustomed to living by his teachings,’ 576d). No longer does he question the steadfastness or the morality of the physical satisfaction sought “en servir dueñas” (‘in wooing women’); he wonders only about “la razón negra por que non recabd[Ø]” (‘the black reason for which he did not consummate,’ 577bd). Amor’s tempting speech has managed to push Juan Ruiz back to where he started. His potential conversion—the one which seems so close in the lines preceding this monologue—has become a fleeting and tentative achievement, seemingly undone by the ensuing setback. The sobriety that has guided him during his long, meticulous attack against carnal Love—“sañudo e non con vino”—is replaced by another inebriating repetition of frustrated seductions: more wooed women, more garrulous procuresses, more endless debates. The interval of lucidity simply ends; the narrator resumes his former vicious attempts, and the quarrel with Amor leaves no lasting change behind. Indeed, the poem even suggests that such intervals—lucid attacks against carnality, followed by a submission to Love’s deceitful “castigos”—should not be regarded as a deviation from the narrator’s sinful custom, but as an integral part of his habit.

Ca, segund vos he dicho, de tal ventura seo  
que, si lo faz mi signo o si mi mal asseo,  
nunca puedo acabar lo medio que deseo:  
por esto a las vegadas con el Amor peleo.

Since, as I have told you, I am of such a fortune | that, whether my  
[astrological] sign determines it, or whether my bad countenance, | I can  
never conclude half [of] what I desire: for this at times I argue with Love.

*LBA*, 180

The present tense of the verb “peleo” indicates that this altercation with Amor constitutes only one among many analogous “vegadas.” The unimpactful debate has happened before, and it is expected to happen again. Among the desires that Juan Ruiz “nunca pued[e] acabar,” therefore, a reader could include his freedom; despite his sober attempts at achieving a conversion, deceitful eloquence and addiction always return him to the captivity of sin. This cycle of sober morality and intoxicated immorality continues throughout the narrative of the *Libro*—ultimately unaltered despite penance (1128-1172) and grief (943-944; 1519-1605). Thus, while the narrating voice of *Confessions* belongs to a convert, freed from vice and perspicuously more enlightened than the lustful heretic who errs in its pages, the *Libro* is narrated by the same captive sinner whom it portrays.

This denial of a conversion, so vividly conveyed by the figure of this fleeting moment of lucidity followed by yet another plunge into the depths of intoxication, constitutes one of the main features that define the relationship between the *Libro* and the *Confessions*. As Marina Brownlee cogently explains, while Augustine’s book pivots around the biographical watershed of his conversion, which turns the whole account into a transition from a “before” of expectation to an “after” of fulfillment, the *Libro* is instead assembled around the absence of such a change. It intentionally recounts “a confession without conversion,”<sup>14</sup> an expectation without fulfillment. Like Augustine, Juan Ruiz seems to seek higher forms of happiness and enlightenment—an alternative to the endless chain of romantic endeavors, vicious yearnings, and tragicomic disappointments that bind his life. But his want remains frustrated. At the end of the *Libro*, the protagonist has remained the same sinner whom we have encountered at the beginning; he has neither learned nor changed.

The captivity that constrains the narrator and protagonist of the *Libro*—who, unlike the subject of *Confessions*, has not been cleaved by the moral and temporal fracture of conversion—matches the “dulces laqueos” which unite Augustine and his friends in the comparative examination

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<sup>14</sup> Brownlee, *The Status of the Reading Subject*.

of sin contained in Book VI. The affinities between Juan Ruiz and Alypius—both inebriated and fettered by a persuasive speech—evoke the submission and powerlessness involved in the yielding of one’s “divided will.” But, while Augustine and Alypius are ultimately freed from this captivity, Juan Ruiz cannot leave it; while the voice that we hear in *Confessions* comes from a space of freedom and lucidity, the verses of the *Libro* are spoken from the dark and seemingly inescapable recesses of a prison. Indeed, the version of the *Libro* that was preserved in Manuscript S opens with the prolonged imprisonment lamented by this voice.

Señor Dios, que a los jodíos, pueblo de perdiçión,  
sacaste de cabtivo del poder de Far[aón],  
a Daniel sacaste del poço de Babilón:  
saca a mí, coitado, d’esta mala presión.

Señor, tú diste gracia a Ester la reína,  
ante el rey Asüero ovo tu graçia digna.  
Señor, dame tu graçia e tu merçed aína,  
sácame d’esta lazeria, d’esta presión [...ina].

Señor, tú que sacaste al profecta del lago,  
de poder de gentiles sacaste a Santiago,  
a santa Marina libreste del vientre del drago:  
libra a mí, Dios mío, d’esta presión do ya[go].

Lord God, who delivered the Jews, people of perdition, | from the captivity  
of the Pharaoh’s rule, | delivered Daniel from the den of Babylon: deliver me,  
afflicted, from this evil prison. | Lord, you gave grace to queen Esther, before  
the Assyrian king she had your worthy grace. | Lord, give me your grace and  
your mercy soon, | deliver me from this wretchedness, from this [...] prison.  
| Lord, you who delivered the prophet from the lake, | delivered Saint James  
from the rule of the heathens, | freed Saint Marina from the belly of the  
dragon: free me, my God, from this prison where I lie.

*LBA*, 1-3

Above the first line of the prayer, on the first page of the manuscript, a rubric states: “Ésta es oraçión qu’el arçipreste fizo a Dios quando començó este libro suyo” (“This is [a] prayer which the archpriest made to God when he started this book of his’). The prayer underlines that the voice that we hear

belongs to a captive; a sinner who has not been freed from the chains of intoxication, and whose will remains divided. The present tense of this complaint highlights that the persuasive speech delivered by the personification of Love still affects the narrator; that his spiritual, intellectual, and moral life still unfolds as an endless alternation of lucidity and drunkenness.

This alternation of lucid and inebriated states, where a definitive conversion never takes place, constitutes not only the main difference between the autobiographical account of *Confessions* and that of the *Libro*, but also one of the main concepts that inform the theory of translation and interpretation conveyed by Juan Ruiz. The lack of a definitive conversion corresponds to the lack of a definitive translation; the strife between the two wills corresponds to that between two competing alternatives in how a reader approaches a text. For the poet of the *Libro*, the setbacks and successes that define a person's spiritual existence extend to the way a person interprets a word, a passage, a story, or the *Libro* itself: not as a conclusive achievement, but as an unending process.

As a consequence, to illustrate how this spiritual alternation between lucidity and drunkenness may serve as a figure for a theory of translation and interpretation, the poet complements Amor's speech with a story whose moral seems to hover between two radically different—albeit equally plausible—interpretations. Among the “castigos” that Amor delivers, and which are characterized by either overt materialism—like the praise of money (490-513)—or demeaning shallowness—like the two physical descriptions of the ideal woman (430-435; 444-448), Amor includes an inconsistent yet revealing exhortation against the dangers of “mucho vino beber” (‘drinking lots of wine,’ 528b). For the most part, this “castigo” consists of shallow remarks concerning the smells and noises emitted by drunken people (545-547); nevertheless, it opens with a tale that might easily serve as a warning against his own speech. In particular, Amor tells of how a “hermitaño” (‘hermit’)—who “en oración bevia” (‘lived in prayer’) and who “nunca el vino bevia” (‘never drank wine’)—received a visit from “el diablo” (‘the devil’), who “vino a él un día con sotleza

presto” (‘one day went to him, ready for subtlety’). With the intent of tempting the devout man, the visitor suggested to him that he should taste “vino,” because from it “se faze | la sangre verdadera de Dios: en ello yaze | sacramento muy santo” (‘is made | the true blood of God: in it lies | a very holy sacrament’). The “hermitaño” abided; predictably, the wine “sacól de entendimiento” (‘pushed him out of his understanding’). So, the “diablo” made another suggestion; he recommended acquiring a rooster to keep track of time, and “alguna fenbra” (‘some hen’) to keep the bird company. The “hermitaño” consented again; but this second consent resulted in a far more tragic outcome.

“Creyó el su mal consejo: ya el vino usava;  
él estando con vino vido cómo se juntava  
el gallo con las fenbras, en ello se deleitava,  
cobdiçió fazer forniçio, desque con vino estava.

“Fue con él la cobdiçia, raíz de todos males,  
loxuria e sobervia, tres pecados mortales;  
luego el omeçidio: estos pecados tales  
trae el mucho vino a los descomunales.

“Desçendió de la hermita, forçó a una muger:  
ella dando sus bozes, non se pudo defender;  
desque pecó con ella, temió mesturado ser:  
matóla el mesquino e óvose a perder.

“He believed his bad suggestion: the wine was already working; | being [inebriated] with wine, he saw how the rooster | mated with the hens, [and] he delighted in it, | coveted to do fornication, since he was [inebriated] with wine. | “With him went the covetousness, root of all evils, | lust and pride, three mortal sins; then the murder: wine brings these same sins | to the [ones who are] outrageous. | “He descended from the hermitage, forced [himself on] a woman; | she, while giving out her cries, could not defend herself; | since he sinned with her, he feared being exposed: | the wretched [one] killed her, and caused his [own] perdition.

*LBA, 539-541*

In these few quatrains, the tale shifts tone grotesquely: from the lighthearted bawdiness of a fabliau about wine and chickens to the atrocity of a tragic fall involving rape and murder. This shift

illustrates the unpredictable misery caused by a temptation delivered “con sotileza”: a persuasive speech that quickly drives a listener from complicit laughter to utter moral confusion. Like Amor himself, then, this devil came—“vino”—to the sober hermit to serve the wine—“vino”—of his tempting speech. Thus, if interpreted correctly, this story would have reminded Juan Ruiz of his present condition; how he has been swayed by a persuasive tempter to relinquish the sobriety that would have led him to a conversion. Nevertheless, instead of emphasizing the relinquishment of a figurative sobriety and the deviation from the path of conversion, Amor interprets the tale superficially and summarily, as a sheer warning against the actual consumption of wine. Accordingly, in the two quatrains that relate the hermit’s capitulation to vice, the noun “vino” is repeated four times. Of course, this interpretation is meant to deceive. Even when interpreted only literally, the hermit’s fall depends more on the influence of persuasion than on the effects of alcohol. Yet, Juan Ruiz chooses to believe the way Amor renders the story—and therefore remains unaware of its warning against persuasive tempters.

Amor’s speech hinges on a narrative that can be interpreted in two antithetical ways. We may assume that a different reader—or perhaps the same reader, but in a different state of lucidity—would have assimilated it differently: as a reminder of the deceptions practiced by silver-tongued seducers. The *Libro* suggests that both ways of interpreting the story coexist in it, in the same way that two wills coexist in a person—the sober repentant and the drunken lecher. This coexistence of two natures in one is figured through one of the elements that appear most prominently in the story told by Amor: the consecrated wine served at mass. Indeed, the hermit’s decision to try wine for the first time is primarily caused by the compelling “sutileza” that characterizes the devil’s speech; and it hinges especially on his improper recourse to the dogma of transubstantiation. In particular, the “diablo” deploys a truthful statement—the belief that from “vino se faze | la sangre verdadera de Dios”—for an immoral purpose—that of inducing the “hermitaño” to drink past the limits of his

“entendimiento.” From a dogmatic perspective, the devil’s statement should be considered correct, albeit not complete. When the devil first mentions the holiness of wine, the hermit responds that he does not know “qué es vino” (‘what wine is,’ 535a). Ideally, his interlocutor should have clarified that, even though the substance of consecrated wine corresponds to “la sangre verdadera,” its accidental qualities remain those of an intoxicating beverage; or, as Thomas explains in the *Summa contra gentiles*, that even consecrated “vinum, si in magna quantitate sumeretur, calefaceret, et inebriaret” (‘wine, if consumed in great quantity, excites, and inebriates’).<sup>15</sup> In other words, the devil neglects to clarify that the transubstantiated wine partakes of two distinct natures, one of which can lead to vice rather than to salvation. These two natures correspond to the two potential ways of assimilating the story itself—antithetical, yet inseparable from each other.

## II. THE PROBLEM WITH SWEETNESS

The *Libro* repeatedly returns to the question of how the same story, speech, or even word can convey antithetical yet inseparable meanings. This question is related to the broader problem of interpretation as a form of translation—how should one render individual signifiers that can contain multiple and often contradictory ideas? From this standpoint, the conversion that we find at the core of Augustine’s *Confessions* offers a stable perspective that the *Libro* lacks. In Augustine’s autobiography, a single foundational event constitutes the criterion through which every other episode or text related in the book can be interpreted. Such an event is missing from the pages of Juan Ruiz’s confession. Therefore, the signs that appear in the *Libro* cannot be converted to one interpretation or the other once and for all; they can be read from the perspective of a sinner and then from those of a penitent—constantly hovering from one extreme to the other. To corroborate

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries*, ed. Dominic Monti (New York: Blackfriars; McGraw-Hill, 1964).

this notion, the poet shows how this ambiguity can also happen at a granular level by highlighting the ambiguity of a single concept: the quality of sweetness.

Sweetness was customarily treated as an ambivalent quality in the Middle Ages, suspended between divine bliss and material pleasure.<sup>16</sup> Augustine himself attaches it to both positive and negative referents in the *Confessions*. On the one hand, he praises God's "dulcedo," characterizing it as an immaterial attribute, "non fallax" and "felix et segura" ('not deceitful,' 'propitious and secure,' II.1.1): sweetness as a dependable, permanent quality. On the other, he condemns the sensory pleasure provided by Homer's poetry as "dulcissime vanus" ('vain in the sweetest way' I.14.23) and warns against the sense of sight because it "inlecebrosa ac periculosa dulcedine condit vitam seculi" ('seasons the life of the world with a tempting and dangerous sweetness,' X.34.52): sweetness as an unfounded, mendacious attribute. Through these contradictory references to sweetness, Augustine suggests that we cannot rely on what we experience through our senses. Although he alternates between the nouns "dulcedo" and "suavitas"—and the adjectives derived from them<sup>17</sup>—to unfold this suggestive ambivalence, his intention remains unambiguous. The readers of *Confessions* are asked to reflect on the deceitful analogies between God's "copia incorruptibilis suavitatis" ('abundance of everlasting sweetness,' II.6.13) and the "mortifera suavit[as]" ('deadly sweetness,' VI.12.21) with which worldly pleasures can bind them; but they are never supposed to doubt whether the author is referring to one kind of "suavitas" or the other.

On the contrary, the poet of the *Libro* seems bent on eliciting precisely this hermeneutical doubt. In the first place, the *Libro* explicitly applies this notion of sweetness to the field of interpretation, distancing it from Augustine's antithesis between physical and metaphysical attributes.

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<sup>16</sup> In her essay on the concept of "Sweetness" in the Middle Ages, Mary Carruthers explains how writers and theologians would deploy this ambiguous dichotomy to show how "aesthetic judgments" seldom coincided with "moral judgments"; see Mary Carruthers, "Sweetness," *Speculum* 81, no. 4 (2006): 999–1013.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

In the first section of the poem, where the narrator Juan Ruiz indicates what his writing is meant to accomplish and how it should be approached, sweetness is mentioned as one of the metaphorical attributes that characterize the more profound sense of the work—the “saber non feo” that lies “en feo libro” (‘not ugly wisdom,’ ‘in an ugly book,’ 16d).

El axenuz, de fuera negro más que caldera,  
es de dentro muy blanco más que la peñavera;  
blanca farina está so negra cobertera,  
açúcar dulce e blanco está en vil cañavera.

The love-in-a-mist, blacker than a cauldron on the outside, | is whiter than  
the ermine on the inside; | white flour is [found] under a black lid, | sweet  
and white sugar is [found] in the lowly cane.

*LBA*, 17

This sequence of metaphors should illustrate the distinction between the patent surface—“negro,” “vil”—and the latent content—“blanco,” “dulçe”—of a work like the *Libro*. But the nesting of dissonant images—the large “caldera” and the energetic “peñavera” encompassing the small, inanimate “axenuz”—and the evocation of sweetness—an unexpected shift from sight to taste—complicate this parallel. Nevertheless, thanks to this figurative context, the reader can ultimately suppose that the quality of sweetness denotes a positive referent: the edifying message that the audience will be able to consume once the base container of the *Libro* has been cracked open. The stark binary evoked by these contrasting images recalls exegetical conventions that I have already treated in the previous three chapters: the antithesis between spirit and letter, content and form, and even “sensus” and “verbum.” The reference to a “dulçe” core in a simile based on the contrast between black and white comes across as an extravagant choice, and Juan Ruiz does not explicitly clarify whether this sweetness should be deemed “fallax” or “mortifera.”; yet, when considered as a singular reference to an established exegetical trope, this metaphorical passage could hardly be considered ambiguous.

The *Libro*, however, quickly undermines this assumption. If we track the references to sweetness that appear in the rest of the poem, we realize that this figure is often used in an antithetical way: to denote a pleasant yet deceitful quality that characterizes the surface of the text rather than its essence. Like the book swallowed by John in *Revelation* (10:9),<sup>18</sup> a text that tastes sweet on the tongue can turn bitter in the stomach. This notion is recalled in the retort that one of the women wooed by Juan Ruiz—a nun—directs to the flattering crone whom he has sent to her convent.

“Non es cosa segura creer dulce lisonja:  
de aqueste dulçor suele venir amarga lonja;  
pecar en tal manera non conviene a monja:  
religiosa non casta es podrida toronja”.

“It is not a safe thing to believe sweet flattery: | a bitter bargain usually  
derives from this sweetness; | to sin in this fashion does not befit a nun: a  
religious woman [who is] not chaste is a rotten orange.”

*LBA*, 1443

The “dulçor” condemned by the nun indicates a duplicitous rhetorical strategy. Namely, it describes the pleasing “lisonja” that sways listeners to engage in a treacherous “lonja”—one where, for instance, the chaste virtue of a “monja” would be traded for the bitterness of a rotten “toronja.” These rhyming nouns underline the deceiving quality of the surfaces mentioned in this passage, whose pleasant qualities contrast starkly with the corruption and treachery that they conceal. The superficial sweetness of the crone’s flattery—her “lisonja”—would prompt the deep, concealed bitterness of the nun’s unchastity—her potential resemblance to a “podrida toronja.” Juan Ruiz condemns these aesthetically pleasing surfaces because he recognizes their morally corrupt depths;

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<sup>18</sup> The philosophical and theological implications of the contrast between sweet and bitter tastes in the *Libro* have been examined in Ryan D. Giles, “The Apple That Fell from Aristotle’s Hand: Fruits of Love and Death in the ‘Libro de Buen Amor,’” *Hispanic Review* 80, no. 1 (2012): 1–19. For an examination of the metaphorical deployment of sweetness in the *Libro*, see Emily Francomano, “‘Este Manjar Es Dulçe’: Sweet Synaesthesia in the ‘Libro de Buen Amor,’” *EHumanista* 25 (2013): 127–44.

sweetness indicates a patent aesthetic pleasantness, while bitterness characterizes a latent moral corruption. Thus, the dichotomy between inside and outside that characterizes the metaphor of the “cañavera” is upended. From a positive spiritual quality, associated with the contents of a text, sweetness is turned into a deceitful sensory quality, characterizing only its form. Considered together, these two passages turn the figure of “dulcor” into a semantic *mise en abyme*: One kind of sweetness—say, the “açúcar dulce” of the first metaphor—could lead to its contrary—say, the “amarga toronja” of the second one, in an endless series of deceiving frames.

These first two uses of the figure of sweetness convey an antithetical divergence between the essence and the appearance of a text—attributes that, albeit deceiving, should be regarded as objective and stable. In other words, the “açúcar dulce” contained in the *Libro* remains “dulce” for every reader who can consume it, just as the “dulce lisonja” delivered by the crone should maintain its flattering qualities for every listener. Nevertheless, in the subsequent references to sweetness, Juan Ruiz abandons this objectivity and stability as well. Sweetness becomes a subjective and unstable attribute—one that people can attach to what they consume, according to their inclination and their will. The poet demonstrates this principle through an exchange that involves the two characters of an animal fable. This fable is told by the aforementioned nun, as she rejects the “dulce lisonja” of Juan Ruiz’s go-between. To vindicate her choice to remain chaste, the nun says that she wishes to avoid the disgrace that occurred “al mur del aldea | con el mur de la villa” (‘to the village mouse | with the city mouse,’ 1369bc). The animal fable that she recounts in the ensuing quatrains is adapted from Gualterus Anglicus’s *Romulus*.<sup>19</sup> In this Latin rendition of Aesop’s exemplary stories, one reads of

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<sup>19</sup> For the sources of this passage, see Rafael Beltrán, “La Fábula Del Ratón de Campo y El Ratón de Ciudad y El Monólogo de Areúsa Sobre La Vida de Las Criadas,” *Celestinesca*, no. 38 (2014): 11–36.

Beltrán, Rafael. “La Fábula Del Ratón de Campo y El Ratón de Ciudad y El Monólogo de Areúsa Sobre La Vida de Las Criadas.” *Celestinesca*, no. 38, Publicacions Universitat de Valencia, 2014, pp. 11–36; Bienvenido Morros, “El Episodio de Doña Garoza a Traves de Sus Fábulas: (Libro De Buen Amor, 1332-1507),” *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 51, no. 2 (2003): 417–64.

how a “Rusticus [...] mus” (‘country mouse’) discovers that the food which his “urbanu[s] [...] amicus” (‘urban friend’) steals—risking his life—from a “penu” (‘larder’) tastes “fellit[*um*] metu non [...] dulce” (‘not sweet, but steeped in gall, because of fear’).<sup>20</sup> Though he follows Anglicus’s model quite closely, Juan Ruiz accentuates the anthropomorphic portrayal of the two mice by turning their furtive infiltration of a larder into an elegant house feast.

“Fue con él a su casa e diol mucho de queso,  
mucho tozino lardo, que non era salpreso,  
enxundias e pan cocho sin raçión e sin peso:  
con esto el aldeano tovos por bienapreso.

“Manteles de buen lienço, una blanca talega  
bien llena de farina: el mur allí se apega;  
mucha onra le fizo e serviçio que’l plega:  
alegría, buen rostro con todo esto se allega.

“He went with him to his house and gave him a lot of cheese, | a lot of fat  
bacon, which was not salt-cured, | lards and baked bread without limit and  
without [measuring its] weight: | with this the villager regarded [himself] as  
happy. | Cloths of fine linen, a white sack | quite full of flour: there the  
mouse takes pleasure; | he gives him lots of honor and thanks, which he likes:  
| [oh] happiness, a good countenance is added to all this.”

*LBA*, 1373-74

In the text of *Romulus*, the mice consume an undefined type of “esca” (‘food’), which “sapit [...] favum” (‘tastes like honeycomb’). Nothing prevents the reader from construing this clarification literally; in other words, to conclude that the mice are gnawing a type of sweet “esca” whose flavor actually resembles that of honey. When Anglicus’s country mouse complains that “Non est sollicito dulcis in ore favus” (‘honey is not sweet in the restless mouth’), we assume that he refers to his awareness of the lasting unhappiness that lies behind the surface of immediate gratifications; restlessness becomes the latent, spiritual bitterness that spoils a sweet mouthful. The sentence itself

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<sup>20</sup> Romulus, *Aesopus Latinus*, ed. Hans Draheim (Berlin: Buchdruckerei von Trowitzsch & sohn, 1893).

emphasizes the materiality of this sensation—the quality of sweetness is still predicated on the mouth that contains the “favus.”

In Juan Ruiz’s translation, on the other hand, none of the foods consumed by the mice—cheese, bacon, lard, bread, and flower—can contain an objectively “dulçe” flavor. Thus, when the mice of the *Libro* argue about the sweetness or bitterness that they perceive in their “queso” and “tocino,” the adjective “dulçe” and the noun “amargura” inevitably designate something subjective and unstable.

[F]alagava el otro deziendo: “Amigo señor,  
álegrate e come de lo que as más sabor;

“Este manjar es dulçe, sabe como la miel.”  
Dixo el aldeano: “Venino yaz en él;  
al que teme la muerte el panal sabe a fiel;  
a tí solo es dulçe, tú solo come d’él.

“Al omne con el miedo no’l sabe dulçe cosa;  
non tiene voluntad clara la vista temerosa;  
con miedo de la muerte, la miel non es sabrosa;  
todas cosas amargan en vida peligrosa.

“Más quiero roer fava, seguro e en paz,  
que comer mill manjares, corrido e sin solaz;  
las viandas preçiadas con miedo son agraz:  
todo es amargura do mortal miedo yaz.

[T]he other one chatted, saying: “Esteemed friend, | be happy and eat  
whatever you fancy; | “This food is sweet, it tastes like honey”. | The villager  
said: “Poison lies in it; | to the one who dreads death, the honeycomb tastes  
like gall; | it is sweet just for you, you alone [should] eat from it. | “To the  
people with fear, nothing tastes sweet; | they do not have a clear will, [their]  
eyesight [is] scared; | with fear of death, honey is not flavorful; | all things are  
embittered in a dangerous life. | “I would rather gnaw broad beans, safe and  
in peace, | than eat thousands foods, chased and without comfort; | with  
fear, the precious foods are [sour, like] unripe [grapes]: where mortal dread  
lies, everything is bitterness.

LBA, 1378c-1381

In the *Libro*, the disagreement between the city mouse and the country mouse concerns what they feel through their senses; whether the “manjar [...] sabe [...] a miel” or “a fiel.” But Juan Ruiz specifies that the dishes they consume cannot be objectively deemed neither sweet nor bitter. As a consequence, when they maintain that these taste either “dulçe” or like “agraz,” the two are emphasizing how their sensory experiences are shaped by their contrasting subjective experiences: their “solaz” or their “miedo.” Although these antithetical reactions reflect a superficial enjoyment, and coincide with aesthetic judgments, they are in fact determined by a deeper dissonance: their respective moral stances. Thus, this use of the figure of sweetness highlights how readers, interpreters, and translators can endow texts with new qualities. Sweetness becomes personal; a quality that does not belong to either the surface or the content of the object that is being consumed, but only to the person who consumes it.

In the *Libro* the figure of sweetness changes rapidly; it first appears as one of the extremes in a familiar dichotomy, then it upends this dichotomy, and finally it makes it entirely subjective and unstable. This quality now shares very little with its unambiguous treatment in Augustine’s *Confessions*. Through this figure, Juan Ruiz highlights how the ambivalence of a text or a story can inhere in each of its discrete components. The antithetical interpretations that he has ascribed to the tale of the devil and the hermit, and that he has figured through the two natures of the consecrated wine, are now found within a single adjective. This ambiguity pervades the last example of sweetness that I want to investigate in this section. Early in the poem, Juan Ruiz tries to seduce a “panadera” (‘baker’) with the help of a male go-between. But the go-between himself ends up seducing the woman, causing the poet’s frustration. To recount the episode, he composes a “troba caçurra” (‘salacious

rhyme'), where he puns on the baker's name—"Cruz" ('Cross,' 113-118)—and on the traditional association between consumption and sex.<sup>21</sup>

Coidando que la avría,  
dixelo a Ferrand Garçía  
que troxiése la pletesía  
e fuese pleités e duz.

Díxome que'l plazia de grado,  
e fizose de la Cruz privado:  
a mí dio rumiar salvado,  
él comió el pan más duz.

Thinking that I would have her, | I said to Ferrand García | that he should  
handle the deal | and be [my] mediator and guide. | He told me that he  
would, happily, | and became an intimate of Cruz: | gave me the chaff to  
ruminate, | [while] he ate the sweetest bread.

*LBA*, 118-19

Given the ambiguity of its last quatrain, the “troba caçurra” can be interpreted in at least two radically different ways. On the one hand, a reader might assume that Ferrand’s achievement in becoming “privado” of “Cruz” corresponds to a successful seduction culminating in sexual intimacy; his eating of the “pan más duz” would stand for the pleasures of a sexual intercourse, while Juan Ruiz’s “rumiar” of “salvado” would indicate the little satisfaction that he can get from writing about it. In this interpretation, the quality of “duz” denotes a subjective sensory pleasure—akin to the flavor tasted by the city mouse in the fable. On the other hand, however, the episode might end on a surprisingly spiritual note: “Cruz” might denote Christ’s cross; Ferrand’s becoming “privado” with it might stand for a religious awakening and a renewed intimacy with Christ; Juan Ruiz’s “rumiar” of “salvado” might indicate his sterile fixation with fleshly pursuits; and the eating of “el pan más duz” might indicate Ferrand’s partaking in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Both interpretations seem

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<sup>21</sup> For an overview of the critical conversation surrounding this episode, see James Burke, “Again Cruz, the Baker-Girl: Libro de Buen Amor, Ss. 115-120,” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 4 (1980): 253–70.

equally plausible. Since “Cruz” can indicate both the woman and the Cross, and since the first “duz” can be interpreted both as a noun, ‘guide,’ and as an adjective, ‘sweet,’ the reader cannot ultimately determine whether the second polysemous “duz” denotes the sweet virtue of Christian contemplation—and Eucharistic consumption—or the sweet sin of carnal pleasure. Two readings coexist in the same passage, in the same way that two natures coexist in the substance and the accident of the Eucharist: inextricable, yet antithetical. The reader’s incapacity to determine on either denotation of “duz” encapsulates Juan Ruiz’s distinctive deployment of sweetness, particularly with respect to the function which this figure fulfills in *Confessions*. On the contrary, when Juan Ruiz evokes the polysemy of sweetness, dichotomies are obfuscated. In the *Libro*, sweetness can belong both to the surface—the “salvado”—and to the depth of a text; it can denote both a quality perceived through the senses and an assessment rooted in morality; both the religious transport of Christian Communion and the secular ecstasy of sexual communion. On most occasions, the reader is not provided with sufficient indications to decide on one or another option, even though a decision seems necessary. We cannot ultimately choose whether “el pan más duz” of the aforementioned “trova caçurra” stands for the erotic joys afforded by the body of the “panadera” or for the salvific influence of the Eucharistic wafer; but we know that this choice matters a great deal. In short, then, the *Libro* evokes the polysemy of sweetness to force its readers towards an admission of exegetical undecidability—of unsurmountable doubt concerning its interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> As Catherine Brown has argued, the *Libro* is devised to “reverse then evacuate the oppositions—sense and letter, inside and outside—upon which [...] proper hermeneutical functioning depends”; see Catherine Brown, *Contrary Things: Exegesis, Dialectic, and the Poetics of Didacticism*, *Figurae* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998).

### III. CHOOSING ONE'S DIET

So far, I have discussed how the *Libro de Buen Amor* confronts us with a confession modelled after Augustine's autobiography. From this unacknowledged source, Juan Ruiz appropriates figures of consumption that he alters in order to define how his book differs from this model, and to articulate a theory of interpretation. In particular, the figure of wine and intoxication underlines how Juan Ruiz's confession lacks the narrative and spiritual watershed of conversion. Rather than revolving around a fixed "before" and "after," the *Libro* unfolds as an unending sequence of successes and setbacks. Moreover, the lack of a conversion deprives the audience of a stable frame from which the forms and contents of the poem can be reliably interpreted. Therefore, the *Libro* establishes that both the author and the reader of the work are bound to hover between antithetical interpretations, comparable to the contradictory states of drunkenness and lucidity. As the example of "duz" exemplifies, this exegetical hovering begins with the interpretation of individual terms. All in all, the *Libro* seeks to prove that none of its elements can be interpreted in a uniform, consistent way. Nevertheless, while it stresses its own ambiguity, the *Libro* seems also determined to show how a reader cannot refrain from interpreting it. The radical ambivalence of its inset narratives—the devil and the hermit, the baker girl—almost forces the audience to settle on one potential reading or another, even though this settling might not last for long.

The necessity of reading the text in one way or another induces Juan Ruiz to add one last element to his theory of interpretation: namely, a reader's ability to choose. To illustrate the importance of this choice, the *Libro* adapts and expands another figure of consumption drawn from the *Confessions*: that of fasting as a battle within the self. The hardships of fasting come across as one of Augustine's recurrent concerns in his autobiography. On many occasions, for instance, Augustine expresses a conspicuous attention to the kinds of sin that originate—or culminate—in the acts of eating and drinking. Famously, the first misdeed of his "inquieta [...] adulescentia" ('restless puberty,'

II.4.9) amounted to a theft of pears, which were bitten only for the taste of transgression, “quod eo liberet, quo non liceret” (‘because it would please the one to whom it was not permitted,’ *ibid.*), like a new Edenic fruit. But even before then, while describing his infancy, Augustine wonders whether his very first sin might not have been caused by his desire for his mother’s milk—because he “ueribus inhiaba[t] plorans” (‘gaped at the breasts, crying,’ I.7.11); later, in relating his proximity to the Manicheans, he underlines the absurdity of their beliefs about digestion, by which they would “anhelar[e] [...] particulas Dei [...] eructando” (‘exhale particles of God by belching,’ III.10.18). The expressiveness and the resonance that characterize the descriptions of sinful food and consumption in the first half of *Confessions* might in part justify Augustine’s prolonged meditation on gluttony, in the conclusive section of the work. As his perspective shifts from the exposition of his life, before his conversion, to a broader exploration of Christian theology and the problem of sin, after his conversion, Augustine decides to treat the specific kinds of temptations that are enabled by each particular sense. As if imitating the expositions of capital vices compiled by Eastern theologians like Evagrius or Cassian, who placed “gula” at the very beginning of their lists, Augustine starts with the sense of taste. He concentrates on the subtle but consequential distinction between the consumptions of food and drink caused “ex indigentiae” (‘by need’), and those behind which might lurk “laqueus concupiscentiae” (‘the leash of desire,’ X.31.44). He admits that he must struggle “cotidie [...] adversus concupiscentia manducandi et bibendi” (‘daily against the desire of eating and drinking’), and that this struggle might ultimately prove unwinnable for a “peccator homo” (‘a mortal sinner,’ X.31.47) like him. Moreover, he prefaces this condemnation of alimentary concupiscence with a revealing clarification; namely, that the daily battle against gluttony will end when God destroys “indigentiam satietate mirifica” (‘hunger with a wonderful assuaging,’ X.31.43). Later, he recounts how he “adversus istam suavitatem pugn[at]” (‘fights against this sweetness’) and “cotidianum bellum ger[it] in ieiuniis” (‘wages a daily war in fasting,’ *ibid.*). Thus, Augustine treats his

attempts to resist the temptations of food as an unending battle that restarts every day—perhaps the single one that he can never win once and for all.

Augustine's figure of fasting as a battle is evoked in a long allegorical episode that appears towards the end of the *Libro*: the “pelea que ovo Don Carnal con la Quaresma” (‘battle which Don Carnal had with Lent’). In this allegory, the beginning of Lent—a forty-day period of fasting in the liturgical calendar of Christianity—is preceded by a lively battle that occurs between the army of “Quaresma,” ‘Lent,’ and “Don Carnal,” who loosely stands for the omnivorous diet of a non-fasting Christian. At the end of the battle, Don Carnal is temporarily imprisoned, before being freed again on Easter Sunday. In many ways, this section constitutes a formal, structural, and thematic culmination for the entire *Libro*. More than any other episode in the book, the “pelea” approximates the moment of conversion that Juan Ruiz's autobiography so conspicuously lacks. First, because it takes place after the most decadent and tiresome section of the poem—the account of the archpriest's erotic adventures in the “sierra” (‘mountains,’ 950b). Here, the protagonist becomes the victim of constant seductions on the part of four “serran[as]” (‘mountain women’), who repeatedly pressure him into eating, fornicating, and composing poetry (950-1042). This alternation of alimentary, sexual, and literary appetites—all repetitive and excessive—seems to adequately summarize the moral captivity that encompasses the protagonist, addicted to the monotony of the same sinful behaviors. Thus, when the “pelea” breaks this pattern with the imposition of an alimentary and liturgical change, a turn away from the fleshly pursuits of “Don Carnal,” the reader assumes that the poem may finally culminate in the memory of a conversion.

However, rather than around the fulfillment of a conversion, this moment too revolves around its lack. Because the transformative realization that informs *Confessions* does not happen in the archpriest's “libro de la [...] memoria,” his recollections remain shapeless, disjointed, far from the orderly “aula ingen[s] memoriae” (‘great palace of memory,’ X.8.) praised by Augustine. This lack of

order is aptly illustrated by the dense allegory and intricate descriptions that comprise the “pelea.” Like many other sections of the poem, this episode too is adapted from a set of renown and recognizable literary antecedents.<sup>23</sup> In both the 13th-century *Bataille de Carême et de Carnage* and its Genoese counterpart, for instance, the personification of Carnival and that of Lent confront each other on an alimentary battlefield; here an army of meats, cheeses, and pies fights against troops of fish and vegetables. This happens in the *Libro* as well. Nevertheless, while the French and Italian models concentrate on the neat opposition between these two dietary alternatives, which amount to the antithetical conditions of feasting and fasting, the Iberian version composed by Juan Ruiz conflates the two in an uninterrupted celebration of excess. Indeed, the poem does not represent this transition to a fast in a style that openly encourages scarcity and moderation. On the contrary, these stanzas grow into a paradoxical display of abundance, underscored by the frequency of alliteration, assonance, and consonance.

The formal abundance of the “pelea” further suggests that the *Libro* itself may lack a discernible order and abide by no apparent principle besides that of excess.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, even though the poem arguably culminates in this excessive allegorical struggle, the battle between Carnival and Lent does not end with a transformation, but with a return to a former state of sin—echoing the aforementioned altercation with the intoxicating personification of Amor. Quaresma manages to constrain Carnal only for a period of forty days, at the end of which the glutton returns to his throne as a ruler: “en carro muy preçiado, | cobierto de pellejos, e de cuero çercado” (‘on a very rich cart, | covered with furs, and wrapped with leather,’ 1216ab). As a consequence, the immoderation that

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<sup>23</sup> For an account of the sources of the “pelea,” see Irma Cespéd, “De La Pelea Que Ovo Don Carnal Con La Quaresma,” *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, no. 16/17 (1980): 71–113. For an analysis of what makes Juan Ruiz’s approach unique, see Lee Ann Grace, “Multiple Symbolism in the Libro de Buen Amor: The Erotic in the Forces of Don Carnal,” *Hispanic Review* 43, no. 4 (1975): 371–80.

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed study of the excess that characterizes the “pelea,” see Louise Vasvari, “The Battle of Flesh and Lent in the Libro de Arçipreste: Gastro-Genital Rites of Reversal,” *La Corónica* 20 (1991): 1–15.

characterizes this section mirrors the intoxication caused by Amor's persuasive and deceitful speech; it does not correspond to a deviation from the norm established in the *Libro*, but to an exercise in some of its defining features.

The lexical, metaphorical, and prosodic ostentation that pervades the “pelea” accords with one of the intentions that the prolog attributes to the whole poem; namely, “dar algunos lección e muestra de metrificar e rimar e de trobar” (‘give some [readers] a lesson and a display of versifying, rhyming, and composing,’ *Pr.* 135-138). Thus, the confident wordplay with which Juan Ruiz sets “costados de carnero” (‘lamb flanks’) and “frisuelos fritos” (‘fried beans’) against “salad[as] sardin[as]” (‘salty sardines’) and “truch[as] de Alverche” (‘trouts from Alverche,’ 1084-1105) encapsulates the poetical generosity of the whole *Libro*. The generous and playful prosody with which the poet embellishes these stanzas substantiates the confidence that he explicitly intends to display in the rest of the book. Put differently, the alliterating, assonating, and rhyming pieces of food which entice the reader in these lines exemplify the richness of palatable tastes that the archpriest offers in the entire poem, through his skilled “metrificar e rimar e [...] trobar.” Besides, this stylistic lavishness constitutes only one of the features that turn the “pelea” into a synecdoche for the *Libro* as a whole. The episode alludes to several contextual factors that broaden the scope of the allegorical struggle, to encompass several themes that appear in the poem alongside consumption: physiological, socioeconomic, and environmental conditions. The workings of physiology are for instance reproduced in Don Carnal's bodily transformations; he starts “apesgado” and “adormido” (‘heavy’ and ‘sleepy,’ 1100c), and ends with “manos enflaqueçidas” (‘weak and thin hands,’ 1121d). Society and economy determine not only the privilege of this allegorical personification, who is depicted as a “rico enperador” (‘wealthy emperor’) holding “por todo el mundo poder” (‘power throughout all the world,’ 1094ab), but also the differentiation between luxurious and humble dishes. The “tollo” (‘sturgeon’) is likened to a “duro villanchón” (‘rude peasant,’ 1115a) while the “lanplea” (‘lamprey’) is

called “noble” (‘noble,’ 1114a). Culture appears in the form of the religious dietary laws that consistently affect Muslims “en la mesquita” (‘in the mosque,’ 1108d) and Jews in “la jodería” (‘jewish quarter,’ 1183a) in the same way that they restrict Christians during these days of abstinence. Finally, several regional toponyms—such as “Guadalquivir” (1107d), “Villenchón” (1115d), “Bermeo” (1112d)—allude to the geographical circumstances that affect the consumption of these meals. All in all, the “pelea” reflects the formal and thematic broadness of the entire *Libro*.

While they serve as a reflection of the broad diversity in forms and themes that characterizes the *Libro*, the innumerable animals and vegetables that challenge each other in the “pelea” paradoxically evoke the many courses of an endless banquet rather than the deprivations of a fast. In other words, instead of celebrating the few alimentary options made available during Lent, this section reminds readers of the many alternatives that can be consumed throughout the rest of the year. As a consequence, this allegorical struggle turns a limitation of options into a proliferation of options, performing a reversal that is accentuated by its excessive use of figurative and auidial tropes. Besides, its formal combination of genres and inspirations—the lists of warriors and labyrinthine skirmishes of chivalric epic; the talking animals of aesopic fables, humorously anthropomorphized; the personifications of allegorical visions; the exchanges of charters and letters—mirrors the structural heterogeneity of the work as a whole: a collection of diverse elements clashing with each other. From a thematic standpoint, its contents well harmonize with most of the debates contained in the poem, since they stage yet another conflict between immediate sensual gratification and the metaphysical rewards promised to those who lead a life of devotion and constraint. Thus, as a figure for the structural abundance, diversity, and perhaps deliberate incongruity of the *Libro*, the “pelea” adds another element to the theory of translation and interpretation conveyed by the *Libro*; it portrays the Arcipreste’s work as a massive collection of options from which the reader needs to choose.

Choice becomes the leading exegetical imperative figured in the “pelea.” The violence of the scene highlights how the components that comprise the *Libro* can thoroughly contradict each other, while the context of the battle, with its combination of social and environmental factors, stresses how this choice can ultimately define a reader’s identity. In the contents and the forms of the “pelea,” the readers of the *Libro* find an invitation to choose those textual elements that can lead to the definition of their individual identities. In particular, the gluttonous stomach of the poem mixes prayers to the Virgin Mary with tips on how to ensnare women, bawdy jokes with expositions of canonical law, odes to material possessions with warnings against the capital sins. Alongside this, the archpriest’s encounter with the allegorical personifications who participate in the “pelea”—“Jueves Lardero” (‘Fat Thursday,’ 1068a), “Carnal,” “Quaresma,” “el domingo de Ramos” (‘Palm Sunday’ 1181a)—expands the scope of his experience to consider not only the liturgical practices observed by all Christians, but also the customs of every social group residing within the boundaries of the Iberian peninsula—a geographical perimeter that is repeatedly recalled in its stanzas. Indeed, as Bienvenido Morros has demonstrated, the unfolding of the episode—in which Carnal, initially defeated, eventually wins—was likely meant to echo two circumstances that were regarded as pivotal events in the cultural and religious history of Iberia: the battle of Alarcos, in 1195, and that of Navas de Tolosa, in 1212. Like Carnal, the king of Castile Alfonso VIII at first sustained a ruinous defeat against the Almohad caliph Al-Mansur, who ruled over and beyond the territories of Andalusia; years later, however, the Catholic king secured a lasting victory over the Almohad successor, caliph Al-Nasir. This event marked a shift in the determination of an ideal Iberian identity; it consolidated the process that would eclipse its plurality, manifested in this Muslim presence, in favor of a

homogenous Christian supremacy.<sup>25</sup> The “pelea” invites a similar choice between the plural constitution of the *Libro* and the homogeneity encouraged by each of its constituents.

When readers of the archpriest’s book face these diverse constituents, they are invited to choose one or several among them—but to choose in any case. They are asked to produce their own hermeneutical diet—their translation—out of the many that are enabled by the arrangement of this vast, contradictory banquet. In other words, the poet suggests that selecting one or the other among these alternatives approximates to one’s decision to eat pork, wine, or fish, since it establishes whether one identifies oneself as a Christian or as a non-Christian, as an inebriated sinner or as a sober penitent. The centrality of this choice is explicitly addressed in one of the opening stanzas of the poem, in which Juan Ruiz praises the one reader who can choose the best option among the many possibilities offered by the *Libro*.

En general a todos fabla la escriptura:  
los cuerdos con buen sesso entenderán la cordura;  
los mançebos livianos guárdense de locura:  
escoja lo mejor el de buena ventura.

Overall, the writing speaks to everyone: | the wise ones will understand the  
wisdom with good judgment; | the buoyant youths should watch for  
foolishness: | may the blessed one choose the best.,

*LBA*, 67

Expressed through a subjunctive form with optative meaning, this injunction from the introductory section serves as a guide for all readers of the text. Unlike the other kinds of audience that the poet mentions in this passage—“cuerdos con buen sesso” and “mançebos livianos”—the definition “de buena ventura” refers to anybody who succeeds in perusing the *Libro* as it was intended; it designates

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<sup>25</sup> Bienvenido Morros, “Historia, Religión y Gastronomía: La Pelea de Don Carnal y Doña Cuaresma En El Libro de Buen Amor,” in *Être à Table Au Moyen Âge*, ed. Nelly Labère, Collection de La Casa de Velázquez (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2017), 129–41.

a consequence of this process, rather than a condition for its fulfillment. Moreover, while the other two categories of readers are offered no options regarding the objective and the mode of their encounter with the poem—they either “entendrán la cordura” or “guárdense de locura”—this reader alone can decide what the indefinite “lo mejor” ultimately means.

## CONCLUSION

The figurative illustration of “esco[ger]” which is proposed in the “pelea,” together with its explicit vindication in the first section of the poem, has arguably affected most readers of the *Libro*, both modern and medieval. To investigate these effects, the critic John Dagenais has assembled a comprehensive catalogue of all the doodles, emendations, and annotations that can be found at the margins of the three extant codices containing the poem: Salamanca 2663, or MS S; Real Academia 19, or MS G; and Biblioteca Nacional 6-1, or MS T. Unlike previous paleographical surveys, Dagenais’s essay on this manuscript tradition endows the medieval readers to whom we owe these notes with hypothetical but seemingly coherent intentions, personalities, tastes. He emphasizes, for instance, how one reader of G seemed particularly anxious to find worthy ethical insights at every mention of “vino”; while another reader attached particular importance to the chronological transition from “quaresma” to “pascua.” Elsewhere, Dagenais remarks how one among the readers of T believed that both the fable of the “mur del aldea” and that of the “perrillo blanchete” (‘little lapdog,’ 1401-1411) culminate with exceptionally profitable teachings; both advocate, in fact, the virtuous contentment for what one possesses over the sinful longing for what one cannot possess. Finally, another annotator sketched a series of idiosyncratic manicules—distinctively elongated and pointy when compared with the rest—on the margins of many folios belonging to MS S. According to Dagenais, this reader shared the previous reader’s attention for the theme of virtuous

contentment, but he preferred lines that incorporated “food imagery,” such as “a los pobres manjares el plazer los repara” (‘pleasure improves poor foods,’ 1371c).

The readers of S, T, and G chose to carefully annotate particular sections of the archpriest’s “libro de la [...] memoria” because they regarded “esco[ger]” as the proper strategy to interpret the text. Through their manicules, scribbles and symbols, they singled out those nuggets of wisdom that they deemed worthy of consumption. As a consequence, by performing this mindful selection, they followed the model proposed by the speaker of the prolog in prose, who explains how the work itself was allegedly composed by “escogiendo e amando con buena voluntad,” assimilating only those recollections which could lead one towards “salvación e gloria del Paraíso.” In other words, the interest that the reader of MS S shows for “food imagery” underlines the intersection between a specific rhetorical feature of the *Libro*—namely, this conspicuous presence of alimentary figures—and a specific readerly practice described by Dagenais—namely, a kind of annotation that points at, selects, and extracts portions of text from the book, to interpret them in isolation.

This emphasis on choice accords with the psychological and theological foundations of the poem. In a prolog in prose that appears only in Manuscript S, the author explains how the readers of the *Libro* will need to rely on the three faculties that comprise one’s “intellect[us]” (‘intelligence’): “entendimiento,” “voluntad,” and “memoria” (‘understanding,’ ‘will,’ and ‘memory,’ *Pr.* 5-9). This passage alludes to Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, where these three elements—which are said to belong to the immortal soul—mirror the perfection and timelessness of divinity. However, in the body of the poem, Juan Ruiz deploys figures of consumption that challenge this initial depiction of the three faculties. The free exercise of “voluntad” is constrained by the intellectual and spiritual obfuscation caused by the consumption of wine and by the persuasion of tempting speeches. The dichotomies that should be illuminated by “entendimiento” are confounded through the hermeneutical undecidability of sweetness. The capacity, reliability, and orderliness of “memoria” are turned chaotic

through the celebration of excess figured in the “pelea.” To counterbalance these flaws, readers are left with the option of “esco[ger]” those sections that they deem worthy of consumption, constructing a diet that can define their own identity, as medieval annotators have done with their carefully placed manicules, symbols, and annotations. However, since this choice depends on the faculties of “entendimiento,” “voluntad,” and “memoria,” and since these remain fallible, temporally and materially finite, readers should not expect them to produce any permanent change. As I have argued, the sobriety that allows the archpriest to speak against the carnal temptations of Amor does not last; the wine of eloquence poured by this allegorical personification returns him to a state of addiction and moral captivity. Similarly, the virtuous detachment from material pleasures caused by the first victory described in the “pelea”—after which “Quaresma” restores a metaphorical cleanness and “Carnal” repents—ends with the triumphal return of the glutton.

This lack of definitive change in the processes of interpretation and translation is figured through the alternation of sobriety and intoxication that shapes the *Libro*. The poem constantly repeats a pattern of transgression and atonement, of inebriation and lucidity, of fasting and feasting. Its main structural quality consists in the lack of resolution that follows these incidents; Juan Ruiz does not learn, does not change, does not advance in any durable way towards the goal of salvation and the pursuit of “buen amor.” While the narrative of *Confessions* frames its series of recollections within the distinct “before” and “after” of their protagonist and narrator, cleaved by the irreversible moment of his conversion, the stories and debates collected in the *Libro* spin endlessly around the void produced by a lack of permanent change. The three figures that I have considered in this chapter corroborate the need to embrace this ambiguity. They depart from Augustine’s model to stress that human language and human intelligence are constrained by matter and time. Therefore, while *Confessions* centers on a definitive conversion, the *Libro* treat interpretation and translation as an

endlessly tentative processes, involving an inevitable repetition of errors, regressions, and partial enlightenments.

## CONCLUSION: GLUTTONOUS EXPANSIONS

During the 15th and 16th centuries, the decadent feasts and voracious eaters that had characterized *Purgatorio*, *Cleanness*, *Piers Plowman*, and the *Libro de Buen Amor* were transfigured into novel contexts and characters, outgrowing the forms of devotional poetry which I have primarily considered in the previous four chapters. First of all, the personification of gluttony that had enlivened Langland's "Confession of the Sins" became a staple of 15th-century morality plays. In the Middle English *Castle of Perseverance*, for instance, the persona of "Gula" figured as one of the many tempters who undermined the protagonist's moral stronghold, wooing him with "al kynnys fode" and with "spycys of goode odoure."<sup>1</sup> In Nicholas de la Chesnaye's *La Condemnation de Banquet*, composed in the first decade of the 16th century, the character of "Gourmandise" joined forces with "Friandise"—"Delicacy"—and "Acoustumance"—"Habit"; together, they repeatedly tried to turn every meal into a binge, celebrating the pleasures afforded by "le gras beuf" ("fatted ox"), the "chapons et pouletz bien nourris" ("well fed capons and chickens"), or the "petit pasté" ("small pie") that one serves "chault et friant" ("warm and delicious").<sup>2</sup> The personification of gluttony also haunted the *autos sacramentales* composed by Calderón de la Barca and José de Valdivielso in the early 17th century, where it was portrayed as an innkeeper, as a prisoner, or as a mad man who worshipped a stomach.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the medieval depictions of gluttonous feasts continued in the ubiquitous "Banquet Imagery" of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues in his classic essay on *Rabelais and His World*,

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<sup>1</sup> David N. Klausner, ed., *The Castle of Perseverance*, Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, Mich: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), 1151-57.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas de La Chesnaye, *La Condamnation de Banquet* (Genève: Droz, 1991), 115-120.

<sup>3</sup> Hilaire Kallendorf, "Dressed To The Sevens, Or Sin In Style: Fashion Statements By The Deadly Vices In Spanish Baroque Autos Sacramentales" (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 145-82.

these novels inherited the “liberat[ion]” of “human speech” and the “free play with the sacred” that characterized the immoderate banquets of the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

In its long-lasting afterlife, the personification of gluttony maintained some of the linguistic exuberance that distinguished it in the Middle Ages, and which largely justified its deployment as a figure for vernacular translation. In Early Modern England, this association seemed to persist in the character of Falstaff, the *Henriad*'s champion of witticisms, revelry, and corpulence. Falstaff's physical rotundity and overwhelming appetites were famously invented by Shakespeare; indeed, neither of the historical figures after whom the jolly knight might have been named—Holinshed's “Fastolf” or the Lollard leader John Oldcastle—was known to be fat.<sup>5</sup> Still, Falstaff came to be remembered as a glutton; perhaps—together with Cervantes's Sancho Panza—the most famous glutton of Western literature. From its introduction in *Henry IV Part 1*, Falstaff is consistently described in terms that evoke Langland's “Gloutoun” or Juan Ruiz's “Carnal”: “fat-witted with drinking,” “sleeping upon benches after noon,” a “trunk of humors,” a “huge bombard of sack,” and a “stuffed cloak-bag of guts.”<sup>6</sup> But Falstaff's indebtedness to the medieval gluttons might also extend to his frequent quotations—and playful reinterpretations—of scriptural passages; indeed, several critics have commented on how no Shakespearian “character alludes to the Bible more self-consciously, more frequently, or with more boldly revisionary misapplication” than Falstaff.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Falstaff's character embodies the two sides of gluttony that I have considered in the past four chapters: on the one hand, the intemperate eater; on the other, the fallible, eccentric, and occasionally unorthodox consumer of Scripture.

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<sup>4</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 278-302.

<sup>5</sup> John W. Shirley, “Falstaff, An Elizabethan Glutton,” *Philological Quarterly; Iowa City* 17 (January 1, 1938): 271–287; David Womersley, “Why Is Falstaff Fat?,” *The Review of English Studies* 47, no. 185 (1996): 1–22.

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV. Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan, Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2002), 1.2.2-4; 2.4.437-40.

<sup>7</sup> Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2013), 234. On Falstaff's peculiar citations from Scripture, see Beatrice Groves, “‘The Ears of Profiting’ Listening to Falstaff's Biblical Quotations,” in *Shakespeare and Quotation*, ed. Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Shakespeare greatly emphasized this aspect of Falstaff's characterization in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a play that was mainly conceived as a comedic vehicle for the fat knight's quips and shenanigans. Albeit generally regarded as a minor accomplishment in the Shakespearean opus, *Merry Wives* has attracted some scholarly interest for its peculiar emphasis on linguistic difference and translation.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, much of the play's comedy arises from the clashing of different languages and dialects. For instance, the audience is supposed to laugh at the many misunderstandings caused by the thick accents that Shakespeare ascribes to a Welsh parson—Evans—and to a French doctor—Caius. In the last section of the play, Falstaff himself uses a derisive food metaphor to mock the ludicrousness of these linguistic idiosyncrasies:

**FALSTAFF** ... 'Tis time I were choked with a piece of toasted cheese.

**EVANS** Seese is not good to give putter—your belly is all putter.

**FALSTAFF** 'Seese' and 'putter'? Have I lived to stand at the taunt of one who makes fritters of English?

*MWW*, 5.5.137-41<sup>9</sup>

Falstaff compares the parson's equivocal pronunciation of English to the process that turns whole ingredients—fruit, vegetables, meat—into “fritters”: small pieces of a foodstuff made unrecognizable as they are chopped and covered in fried batter. Therefore, he implies that the English he speaks can become similarly trivial and scrambled when it is placed into the mouth of the Welshman. But the linguistic comedy of *Merry Wives* is not limited to funny accents. In a different exchange involving the parson, English itself becomes the tongue that “makes fritters” of a more dignified language: Latin. This happens when one of the merry wives mentioned in the title—Mistress Page—asks the parson to test her son's proficiency in Latin; the short, chaotic lesson that ensues stands out for its

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<sup>8</sup> Angelika Zirker, “Language Play in Translation: Character and Idiom in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*,” in *Crossing Languages to Play with Words*, ed. Sebastian Knospe, Alexander Onysko, and Maik Goth, 1st ed., Multidisciplinary Perspectives (De Gruyter, 2016), 283–304.

<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori, Arden Shakespeare. Third Series (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: T. Nelson, 2000).

“outrageous Englishings,”<sup>10</sup> caused by the Welshman’s confusing accent and by the salacious misconstructions put forward by the housemaid, Mistress Quickly.

**EVANS** ... What is the focative case, William?  
**WILLIAM** O — *vocativo* — O —  
**EVANS** Remember, William; focative is *caret*.  
**QUICKLY** And that’s a good root.

*MWW*, 4.1.43-47

Of course, Quickly confuses the Latin verb “caret” (‘is lacking’) with the English noun “carrot”—the edible “root.” This misunderstanding is facilitated by Evans’s unintentionally indecent pronunciation of the term “vocative”; the resulting adjective “focative,” which sounds like “fuckative,” suggests that the “caret” should be understood as a sexual implement, prompting Quickly’s expression of approval: “that’s a good root.” All in all, Falstaff’s own play unfolds as a comedy of misconstructions and mistranslations, so much so that his own decision to pursue the titular “merry wives” is first introduced as the consequence of a misconception and a mistranslation:

**FALSTAFF** ... Briefly, I do mean to make love to Ford’s wife. I spy entertainment in her: she discourses, she carves, she gives the leer of invitation. I can construe the action of her familiar style, and the hardest voice of her behaviour—to be Englished rightly—is: ‘I am Sir John Falstaff’s.’  
**PISTOL** He hath studied her well, and translated her will—out of honesty into English.

*MWW*, 1.3.40-46

Shakespeare’s glutton is described as a drunkard, a pilferer, a “hodge-pudding” and a “puffed man”; but he is also characterized as an imperfect translator, whose mischievous “English[ing]” of texts and signs can hinder “honesty” and lead one to ruinous ends—as he himself discovers in the public humiliation which concludes *Merry Wives*. Something of the figures of gluttony that I have examined in this dissertation lives on in Falstaff’s appropriation of Scripture, in the clashing of vernaculars that surrounds him, and in his tendency to mistranslate.

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<sup>10</sup> Patricia Parker, “The Merry Wives of Windsor and Shakespearean Translation,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (September 1, 1991), 227.

The four chapters that comprise this dissertation prove that, by the late 14th century, a figure rooted in biblical exegesis and in the pastoral writings of the Early and High Middle Ages had entered the figurative vocabulary of Western European Christian poetry: gluttony had become a figure for vernacular translation. The archive that I have considered in my investigation encompasses works written in Spain, Italy, and England over the course of a century: from Dante's *Purgatorio*, completed around 1316, to the revision of the *Libro de Buen Amor* prepared by Alfonso de Paradinas in 1415, through two Middle English works from the last decades of the 14th century, *Cleanness* and *Piers Plowman*. In its own way, each one of these poems deploys the figure of gluttony to articulate theoretical arguments about the status and the semantic potential of the vernacular, the close relationship between translation and hermeneutics, and the limitations of both. The punishment that Dante imagines for the gluttons of *Purgatorio* figures the corruptibility and imperfection of the Italian vernacular, which is redeemed as a language of salvific desire. The gluttonous behaviors condemned in *Cleanness* figure the risks of heterodoxy and literalism that are involved in the craft of scriptural translation, and particularly in the translations from Latin into the vernacular that were subjected to intense scrutiny in late 14th-century England. The personification of gluttony in *Piers Plowman* figures the inevitable semantic losses that, according to Langland, originate in the transition from Latin into the vernacular; losses that he also associates with a spiritual and moral impoverishment. Finally, the displays of gluttony that distinguish the *Libro de Buen Amor* figure the inherent ambiguity of any linguistic exchange, suggesting that every act of interpretation must be understood as a form of translation: a temporary choice that belongs to an endless cycle of imperfect attempts.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I have proposed that the figures of consumption and gluttony that appear in these works of poetry account for a complex, compelling, and hitherto understudied theoretical complement to the practices of translation that underlay and pervaded the culture of the Middle Ages. I have contended that these figures convey arguments that question,

challenge, and subvert the ostensible theoretical dicta that—according to many current histories of translation—dominated the thinking about this practice for more than a millennium. In particular, I have anticipated that the authors who belong to my archive resist Jerome’s distinction between “sensus” and “verbum,” and instead advance arguments on translation that seem to chime with the propositions that we tend to attribute almost exclusively to 20th and 21st-century theorists of translation—thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, or Lawrence Venuti. In “The Task of the Translator,” for instance, Benjamin reflects on the temporal finiteness of language in terms that echo Dante’s assertions on the corruptibility of the vernacular. He highlights that all translations should be deemed inconclusive and ephemeral, because

just as the tone and significance of great literary works are completely transformed over the centuries, the translator’s native language is also transformed.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin’s definition of translation as a “temporal and preliminary” attempt to interpret a text also conforms with the theory of hermeneutics articulated in the *Libro de Buen Amor*, according to which interpretation unfolds as an ever-imperfect cycle of contradictory choices.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Benjamin’s invitation to consider “the interlinear version of the holy scriptures” as “the prototype or ideal of all translation”<sup>13</sup> reminds us that our approach to medieval practices of translation should not be limited to what Roman Jakobson called “‘interlingual translation’ or ‘translation proper,’”<sup>14</sup> but should extend to intralingual translations, redactions, and glosses. Similarly, Derrida’s reflection on the “curse” of translation—which he presents as a task both indispensable and impossible in his essay “Des Tours de Babel”<sup>15</sup>—parallels Langland’s conception of translation as an inevitable loss, while relying on examples of polysemy that would befit the *Libro de Buen Amor*. Finally, the main idea that

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” 156.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 157

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 165

<sup>14</sup> Roman Jakobson, *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation, On Translation* (Harvard University Press, 1959), 233.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, “Des Tours.”

Lawrence Venuti puts forward in his collection of essays *Translation Changes Everything*, and which is so eloquently encapsulated in its title,<sup>16</sup> could be ascribed to all the works that I have analyzed, as they reject the unchangeability of Jerome's "sensus" and "verbum." Nonetheless, the most enthusiastic embrace of this change probably belongs to the poet of *Cleanness*, who understands vernacular translation as a transformation that can grow the implications, pertinence, and effects of the original text.

My dissertation ultimately demonstrates that the study of medieval translation theory should take into account a broader range of texts, forms, and practices, and that future histories of translation should engage more actively with the fecund disciplinary and conceptual challenges posed by the writings produced in the medieval period. The theories of translation developed in the Middle Ages were not conveyed exclusively through the argumentative prose of prefaces, commentaries, and treatises; they were also articulated implicitly, within poetical works that were primarily meant to offer spiritual enlightenment and aesthetic pleasure. I have centered this investigation on the Christian devotional poetry of the 14th century, and I have primarily considered poems written in Italian, Middle English, and Spanish. Nevertheless, I maintain that the search for figurative theories of literature, interpretation, and translation should be extended to a more comprehensive corpus of languages, periods, and genres. How was gluttony deployed as a figure for exegetical "carnalitas" during the 12th and 13th centuries? Did romances and fables—narratives that were constantly translated into different vernaculars—develop distinct figures of interpretation and adaptation? The

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<sup>16</sup> Venuti further clarifies that "translation carries the potential to bring about multiple transformations. Translation changes the form, meaning, and effect of the source text, even when the translator maintains a semantic correspondence that creates a reliable basis for summaries and commentaries. Translation changes the cultural situation where the source text originated through an investment of prestige or a creation of stereotypes. Translation changes the receiving cultural situation by bringing into existence something new and different, a text that is neither the source text nor an original composition in the translating language, and in the process it changes the values, beliefs, and representations that are housed in institutions." Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything*, 10.

figures that I have examined in the previous four chapters stand out for their mobility: They do not belong to a single vernacular, to a single context, to a single tradition. They exist in translation.

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