

NOTEWORTHY LEXICAL EVIDENCE IN THE
MIDDLE ENGLISH *LETTER OF ALEXANDER TO*
ARISTOTLE

The Middle English *Letter of Alexander*, a translation of the well-known *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem* of uncertain date, is found in but one manuscript, Worcester Cathedral F.172¹. This codex of 210 folios (originally containing at least sixteen more folios in the beginning, and perhaps more at the end of the extant text) is a collection, chiefly in English, of various didactic, contemplative, and sacerdotal treatises, written on paper measuring approximately 11" by 7", the watermarks of which indicate a date of production in the third quarter of the fifteenth century². The manuscript was executed by one scribe, who has been identified by Dr. Doyle as that same copyist earlier singled out by Eleanor Hammond as responsible, in whole or in part, for half a dozen manuscripts, including two copies of the *Tales of Canterbury*. The scribe certainly had at his disposal manuscripts once owned by John Shirley, as both Hammond and Brusendorff have proven beyond a reasonable doubt; and it may well be that the scribe worked in Shirley's own scriptorium, though at a time after the death in 1456 of that seemingly indefatigable copyist of Lydgate and Chaucer. Hammond noticed that in no text copied by the scribe was there any reference to a period after the time of Edward IV: this is equally true of those texts found in the MSS which Doyle has added to the list of undoubted productions by the same individual³.

Whether the scribe himself is responsible for the translation of the *Letter*, found on ff. 138r–146v of the Worcester MS, is a question perhaps incapable of definitive answer. Miss Betty Hill, who has recently edited from the same MS the unique Middle-English version of the prose *Legend of the Cross before Christ*⁴, sees in this text examples of scribal errors that indicate the Worcester text is a copy. We find in the text of the *Letter* numerous examples of omissions of final letters from words and even of whole words which clearly indicate that for this text, too, the scribe worked from an exemplar, but we cannot be certain that this exemplar was not a draft of his own earlier translation or his own notes. The translation of the *Letter* is not of high quality and the translator's strict adherence to the word order of his Latin source often obscures the sense of the Middle English rendering. One might think that a translation of such dubious merit would not be likely to have been copied and preserved, and that since the MS contains at least one translation that is free and fluent⁵, the *Letter* might perhaps represent the imperfect abilities of the scribe himself. But such conjecture cannot stand against Dr. Doyle's observation that since so many of the translations in Worcester F.172 depend on their sources for intelligibility, the MS was doubtless designed as a crib for an audience

whose Latinity was deficient. If Doyle’s rationale be accepted, the crude literalism of the translation of the *Letter* cannot in itself help to decide the question of the prior history of the text.

The literalism of the translation is, however, most useful in the presentation of some unusual lexical evidence afforded by the translator. Even a cursory glance at the *Letter* and the manuscripts of the *Epistola* convinces the reader that the translator was dependent on a version of the Latin text represented in a recognized sub-group of three manuscripts, each the product of the twelfth century, and each of English provenance: Cambridge, University Library MS. Mm.5.29 (MS. U); London, British Museum, MS. Royal 15.C.VI (MS. R); and London, British Museum, MS. Royal 12.C.IV (MS. Re). In the relatively small number of variant readings that separate these three MSS, the Middle English version stands with the reading of U, even when U is opposed to both R and Re, in all but one insignificant reading. Our method, then, is to present interesting readings from the *Letter* along with the reading of URRe, with citations to Boer’s critical edition of the *Epistola*.

1. F. 138v, 11. 12ff.: “I do thankynges to the strength and vertu of the youngelynges of Macedony and, unconvict or overcomen in our host, forwhi thei han preserved my pacience.”

URRe: “Ago gratias Macedoniae juvenum virtuti et invicto exercitui nostro, quia in ea patientia perseveraverunt ut rex regum appeler.” (cf. Boer, p. 2, 11. 11ff.)

Here the translator translates L. *invictus*, “unconquered, subdued, invincible”, as *unconvict* which heretofore has first been attested by the *OED ante 1618*, Joshua Sylvester, *A Divine and True Tragi-Comedy; Job Triumphant in His Triall*, IV, 32, 12:

Both against Job began his wrath to flame
 . . .
 And also those his Foe-friends, for so strict
 Condemning Job, untry’d and unconvict.

In this passage *unconvict* means “unconvicted”, though *convict* in the sense of “overcome, vanquished, subdued” is first attested by the *MED ca. 1430*, Capgrave’s *Life of St. Katherine*, 147: “Oure faderis here befrom . . . were neuer in bataill, neyther conuycte ne lorn.”

2. F. 138v, 11. 29ff.: “With our ordynaries and preparatories we han purposed of these provinces and many roial touns, saide as in the first epistel I signified to the.”

URRe: “. . . ordinarios praeparatoresque nostros praeposuimus orientis provinciis, multis opibus regalibus ditati, ut in priori epistola significaveram tibi.” (cf. Boer, p. 3, 11.9ff.)

Latin *ordinarius* means “overseer” and, in a military context, refers to a

centurion of the first cohort. Though the word *ordinary*, with the sense of “one who has of his own right immediate jurisdiction in ecclesiastical cases”, is known in English from the time of Wycliff, its use in a military context with the meaning of “a staff of officers in regular attendance or service”, is first attested in a document of 1526. *L. Praeparator*, “a preparer”, denotes one who prepares medicine, specimens, or who makes medical preparations, when it is first noted in English in the eighteenth century. *Preparer*, “one who or that which prepares”, is first attested in 1548.

3. F. 139r, 11. 25ff.: “Wher, with the most fertile and plentivous regioun awounded of the felicite, elate with suche a joie that I cam to such worthi placis whiche that the comelynges of that regioun bifor saide, unto that we fal nat among serpentis and so many kyndes of wield bestis. . . .”

URRe: “Ubi cum fertilissimarum regionum admirarer felicitatem, quodam gaudio elatus digna conveneram loca, quamquam praedixerant nobis incolae regionis ejus, ne inter serpentes et rabida ferarum genera incideremus. . . .” (cf. Boer, p. 6, 11.4–7)

Here the context argues against the more common meanings of *elate*, “proud, haughty” (first attested *ca.* 1375) and “exalted, lofty, noble” (first attested *ca.* 1420) in favor of the meaning “inspired (as with joy or hope), in high spirits, exultant”, hitherto first attested in a work of 1647, Edward, Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England, Begun in the Year 1641*, II, 1, 116: “. . . for if we were not then in a condition to defend our selves, in forty days . . . an army elate with Victory, when no Town was fortify’d, or Pass secur’d, might run over the Kingdom; especially the People being every where so like to bid them welcome.”

4. F. 140v, 11. 3ff.: “I than so wroth with the ductors and leders that brought us in thiese assautis, I bad of these to put .cl. in the floode, to whomso hunshid, punshid, and shoved at to swymmeng and rowyng and, unaware of these rede epothams, worthi and just peyne to bere.”

URRe: “Iratum ego ducibus qui nos in insidias deducebant, jubeo ex his .cl. in flumen mitti. Quibus propulsis natantibusque invicti hippotami rursum dignos justa poena affecere. . . .” (cf. Boer, p. 13, 11.4–6)

A variant of *hunch*, *hunsh*, “to thrust into, to push” is first attested *ca.* 1500 *There was a ladie*, 6: “He took a thing that stiffe did stand & hunched her & punched her & made great game.” The *MED* also cites what may be an appearance of this work in a surname, *Johannes Hunche*, from a document of 1394.

5. F. 143r, 1. 40-f. 143v., 1. 4: “To fal in the nyght in the maner of wulflockis unmeasurable snowes bigan, of whose ences or ekyng dre-dyng, lest thei shuld hepen in castels, I saw the Knyghtes to trede and

throw the snow ne that uttirly the hepyng of theym shuld drawe the cold in to the castels.”

URRe: “Cadere mox in modum vellerum immensae nives coeperunt. Quarum aggerationem metuens in castra cumularent, calcare milites nivem deforis jubeo, ne omnino earum accumulatione in castris frigore contraheremur.” (cf. Boer, p. 34, 11. 10ff.)

L. vellus denotes “wool shorn off, a fleece”, and is used by Martial *Epigrammata*, 4, 3, 1, of snow flakes. *Wool-flock* is first attested from a text of 1555, *Calendar of the Ancient Records of Dublin, in the Possession of the Municipal Corporation of That City* (1889), p. 451: “A new charter . . . by the whiche they have the forfaictures of wool flocks”. (*OED*, *wool*, 5). ME *flocke* (*flokke*), “a lock, tuft, or particle”, from L. *floccus*, was perhaps adopted from OF *floc*, “a lock of wool, a snowflake.”

The translator’s rendering *I saw* for the familiar verb form *jubeo* is difficult to explain.

6. F. 144v, l. 15: “After al this as we felt us risen, arraied and adorted.”

URRe: “Post hec omnia ut paperemus adhortatus est” (cf. Boer, p. 42, 11. 6–7).

The first attestation of *adhort*, “to urge, exhort, incite”, is from 1539, Richard Taverner, *The Garden of Wysdome conteynyng pleasaunt floures that is to say, propre and quycke sayinges of Princes, Philosophers and other sortes of men*, II, 42v: “Adhortyng offycers and rulers to punysh offendours, & malefactours, he sayde, such as myghte restrayne wycked doers and wolle nat; ought to be stoned to death.”

7. F. 141r, 11. 6ff.: “Therfor at the first spryng or risyng of the moone beames, sodainly arrectis serpentis, so named, with sharpe tales, to shepherdis jugement cald scorpiouns, askyng to the water, to the castels even flowed unnumerable”.

URRe: “. . . cum ad primos luneae radiantis ortus subito arrectis serpentis acударum aculeis a pascualibus indicii scorpiones consuetam patentes ad aquationem ad castra innumeri confluxere. . . .”

The translation of this passage is not at all precise: here, as elsewhere in the MS, the translator has misconstrued the minimis of a form of *indicus*, “of India”, as *judicum*, “judgement”; and *even flowed*, the subject of which is *serpentis*, might better have been rendered “ran together”. Although *arrectis* may in fact represent the earliest attestation of the adjective *arrect* (hitherto first noticed in a text of 1646, J. G[regory], *Notes and Observations*, 142, with the inflection *-is* added on analogy with or in anticipation of the following word *serpentis*, the word is better to be understood as having been carried over unchanged from the source. Such is the translator’s practice, as will be seen from the following examples, when an appropriate English word does not suggest itself immediately.

8. F. 138r, 11. 16ff: “It is a wounderful lond and moder of so many goode thynges berith or she is a conceiveres of evil thynges. . . .” Here, the unattested *conceiveres* translates L. *conceptrix* in a fashion analogous to that noticed by Miss Hill in the *Legend of the Cross before Christ*, where *blasfemiam* is rendered *blasphemereres* (OED, *blasphemeress*, hitherto first cited 1548)⁶.

9. F. 139v, 11. 36–38: Pynes and abietes, whiche bien trees of the woode, thei overcame the strength and gretnes to make edifices and housyng, therof the comelynges of that place useden”. There is no noun in English to translate the reading of URRe at this point, *abietumque* (from *abies*, *-etis*, “the silver fir tree”, but cf. the later English formations *abietate*, *abietene*, *abietic*, *abietin(e)*, etc. The Old English version of the *Epistola* similarly carries the word over directly from the Latin as *abies*, the only occurrence of this word in an Old English text: “. . . on þære ea ofre stod hreod & wintreow [surely an error for *pintreow*] & abies þæt treowcyn ungemetlicre.”⁷

10. F. 140r, 11. 25ff.: “But I wist bi the buystous and beestious serpentyne places to be to us a straunge jorney. . . .” This unattested adjectival formation, spelt *bestious*, is again used to translate L. *bestiosa* on f. 144r, l. 4.

11. F. 141v, 11. 18–21: “Therof and from that bifore lucan a litel tyme with white lecherous beestis havyng dyvers colour in maner of girdels, with which myse, to sight and shewyng like unto foxes, wenten into the castels.” L. *lucanum*, “dawn, brightness of dawn”, did not find a direct English cognate. The sense of these lines cannot be said to have been clarified by the reading of URRe, *in modum zonarum*, “in the manner of girdels”, for that of most manuscripts, *in modum ranarum*, “in the manner of frogs”.

12. F. 142v, 11. 39ff.: “From thens I comaunded and bad other, with axes and glayves armed, to folowe the horsmen; and tubicynes and trumpers to be in the first host of the bataile. . . .” Unattested *tubicynes* is used to render L. *tubicines* (from *tubicen*, *-cinis*, “trumpeter”). Fourteenth-century Latin synonyms from British sources include *tubarus*, *tubator*, and *tubicinarius*. A form of *tubicen* had entered English by 1656, T[homas] B[lount], *Glossographia*, s.v. *Tubicinate*, “to sound the Trumpet”. The use of the synonym *trumper* (after OF *trompeur*, and attested in English from the thirteenth century) proves our translator knows the meaning of the Latin word.

13. F. 144r, 11. 17ff. “Forwhi these anceps and kervyng wordis of them here and ther I flotered and, disdeigneng dreede, I saide. . . .”

The translator carries over L. *anceps*, “two-headed, double”, hence, “wavering, doubtful, dangerous”. The word is often used to describe double-edged axes (Plautus, *Rudens*, IV, 4, 114; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII, 397; etc.) which may account for its collocation here with *keryng*.

14. F. 145r, 11. 3–4: “While thei diden this we saw from the west jubar shyneng and the beames of the sonne smote the toppes of hevenes”.

Jubar, -is, unattested in any English cognate, denotes “the radiance of the heavenly bodies”. The translator apparently does not understand the word in his text, for earlier (f. 144v, 11. 17–18) he has rendered the clause “nam solis arborem loqui ac responsa dare ad primos jubaris ortus affirmabat” as “forwhi the tree of the sonne to speke and to yeve aunswer at the first bidding and risyng, he affermed”, perhaps misconstruing *jubaris* as a form of *jubeo*.

15. F. 145v, 11. 12ff.: “Set bifore hym in a table ebuyne and grete libature, foode, or relief ther was of the souper the day bifore, knyves of ivory, bras, irun, and leede, gold and silver in plente.”

URRe at this point read “. . . positaque ante eum in t(h)abellā ebithina (Re: ebenima) ingens libatura, quae illi ex pridiana cena superfuerat, . . . where many other manuscripts show *cliba turis* (? a corruption of *gleba turis*, “lump of frankincense”). *Libature* (as if from L. **libatura*), “the making or offering of libations”, has been hitherto first attested 1632, Philemon Holland, *Cyrupaedia, the Institution and Life of Cyrus, the first of that name, kyng of the Persians*, 71: “And no sooner was hee entred the borders, but presently hee there procured the gracious favour of Dame Tellus, with Libatours and liquid offerings. The Gods also and inhabitant Patrons of Assyria he pacified with solide hosts and sacrifices.” It is not clear from either the Latin text or the Middle English translation whether *libature* is meant to refer to the offering of a libation, or to a *libatory*, “a libatory vessel”, which is first noted in English from a text of 1609.

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Notes

1. See John Kestell Floyer, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Preserved in the Chapter Library of Worcester Cathedral*, ed. and rev. Sidney Graves Hamilton (Oxford: James Parker, 1906). The *Epistola* has been edited by W. Walther Boer, *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem ad Codicum Fidem Edidit et Commentario Critico Instruxit* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1973). We have recently completed an edition of the Middle English *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*.

2. A. I. Doyle, “An Unrecognized Piece of *Piers the Ploughman's Creed* and Other Work by its Scribe”, *Speculum*, 34 (1959), 428–36, identifies the watermarks as Briquet nos. 8695, 8765. In at least one detail, the fact that the straight stem of the large P is not broken by the cross-stroke of the letter, Briquet no. 8651 is also worthy of consideration, though in any event the period ca. 1460–80 is perhaps as close as we can come to a date of the MS.

3. See E. P. Hammond, “A Scribe of Chaucer”, *MP* 27 (1929), 27–33 and her earlier study, “Two British Museum Manuscripts (Harley 2251 and Add. 34360): A Contribution to the Bibliography of John Lydgate”, *Anglia*, 28 (1905), 1–28 as well as A. Brusendorff, *The Chaucer Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1926), pp. 181–82, 207–212; and Doyle, *Speculum*, 34 (1959).

4. Betty Hill, “The Fifteenth-Century Prose Legend of the Cross before Christ”, *Medium Ævum*, 34 (1965), 203–2).

5. As for example the Middle-English translation of the *Emendatio Vitae* of Richard Rolle of Hampole, found on ff. 16r–32v; see M. Deanesly, *MP*, 17 (1919), 181–83.

6. Hill, *Medium Ævum*, 34 (1965), p. 209.

7. S. Rypins, ed., *Three Old English Prose Texts*, E.E.T.S., o.s. 161 (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), p. 12, ll. 4–5.