

PHILOMENA'S SONG: PECHAM, *TRANSLATIO*, AND
A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH POET-TRANSLATOR

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At different times over the years, scholars and editors have attributed two mid-fifteenth-century nightingale poems to that prolific monk of Bury St. Edmunds, John Lydgate.¹ The first of these, a poem entitled *A Sayenge of the Nyghtyngale* in the manuscripts, is an unfinished dream-vision in which an angel instructs the dreamer-narrator on the true nature of the nightingale's song; that is, rather than fleshly love, the nightingale praises pure love by grieving for Christ's sufferings. The attribution of this poem to Lydgate remains more or less uncontested. The second of these poems, on the other hand, entitled simply *The Nightingale* in both extant manuscript copies, is complete, but its attribution to Lydgate is open to question for various reasons.² Regardless of authorship, however, these poems share important elements, including a common source and a common intent, for as the *Nightingale*-poet notes in the opening stanzas, he composed the poem to inform his audience of the true significance of the nightingale's song. The common source for both poems is a nightingale lyric composed by another Englishman some 180 years earlier. Again, as the *Nightingale*-poet notes early in his poem, he learned of the bird's significance from another text:

This brid, of whom y haue to you rehersed,
Whych in her song expired thus ande deyede,
In latyn fonde y in a boke well versed,
Ande what in morall sense it signifiede,
The which in englysh y wold were notified
To all that lusty are it for to here,
Yf that my conny[n]ge suffycient ther-to were. (106–12)

The "latyn...boke" the poet "englyshed" is the thirteenth-century *Philomena, praevia temporis amoeni*, a lyric composed by the Franciscan Archbishop of Canterbury John Pecham (ca. 1230–1292).³

In *Philomena*, Pecham presents a meditation on salvation history based on the spiritual movement of the liturgy of the hours. Surviving in over thirty manuscripts, *Philomena* became a fairly popular poem in the late Middle Ages and was translated into French (*Rossignol*) by an anonymous poet as well as into English by our poet.⁴ In addition, Lydgate used it as the basis for *A Sayenge of the Nyghtyngale*, though his poem is not a translation of Pecham's poem.⁵ In the present study, I shall explore the

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relationship between Pecham's poem and *The Nightingale* in an effort to examine the anonymous late medieval poet's poetics of *translatio*. Further, I wish to suggest that *The Nightingale* provides both an engaging instance of *Philomena*'s enduring appeal in the later Middle Ages and an illuminating view of at least one poet's reading and reception of Pecham's poem.

Briefly, Pecham composed *Philomena* in eighty-seven four-line stanzas, following the Goliardic measure of thirteen syllables with a monorhyme, as stanza nine illustrates:

Et cum in meridie sol est in fervore,
Tunc dirumpit viscera nimio clamore,
Oci, oci clamitat illo suo more
Sicque sensim deficit cantus prae labore.

[And then at mid-day when the sun is in raging heat, her heart bursts with much song; she cries "Oci! Oci!" as is her custom, and so her song gradually fails because of her labor.]⁶

The poem's obvious overall structure falls into seven sections. In the prologue (1–16), Pecham summarizes the story of *Philomena*'s death; that is, when she perceives death approaching, she ascends a tree and expends herself in song. He also sets forth his chief interpretation of the bird as "Animam virtutibus et amore plenam" [the soul filled with virtues and love] (12.2) though he includes several of the bird's other traditional roles, from harbinger of spring to bird of violence. In the remainder of the poem, then, he weaves together his persona's commentary with a series of song-prayers *Philomena* sings. These songs, the heart of the poem, constitute what he calls a mystic day: at lauds (17–24), *Philomena* sings of the Creation and the Fall; at prime (25–34), she considers Jesus's infancy; at terce (35–46), she recalls His ministry and teachings; at sext (47–77), she recounts His passion; and at none (78–82), she recalls His last words and dies. The bird now silent, the persona concludes the poem with an encomium to her and a final comment to his audience in an epilogue (83–87).

I have argued elsewhere that Pecham combined the nightingale image with the liturgy of the hours to articulate the three stages of the *via mystica*, purgation, illumination, and perfective union.⁷ Meditating particularly on Jesus's life and death as she sings the hours, *Philomena* progresses through the stages of the *via mystica* until she expires in a unitive experience with the crucified Christ. This unitive experience serves as climax to the poem's devotional movement and emphasizes Pecham's interpretation of the bird as a figure for the devout soul seek

ing Christ in mystical prayer. Mindful of his audience, whom he addresses initially as “carissime” [most dear one] (5.602) and later as “frater care” [dear brother] (87.610), Pecham encourages his audience, presumably a fellow Franciscan, to imitate Philomena, who imitates Christ by emptying herself in song and who achieves mystical union at poem’s end.⁸ Thus, in part, his poem offers a meditative *exemplum* that perhaps could help lead his “frater” to a unitive experience with the divine.

Turning to the fifteenth-century Middle English translation of *Philomena*, we find a poem of fifty-nine stanzas composed in rhyme royal. Not surprisingly, *The Nightingale* follows the same seven-part structure: a prologue (1–17), lauds (18–28), prime (29–39), terce (40–48), sext (49–54), none (55–56), and an epilogue (57–59). We also see a similar attention to Jesus’s crucifixion and death in sext and none, respectively, and with certain stanzas, especially in the prologue, we find a fairly close rendering of the Latin original. For instance, the fifteenth-century poet translates stanza nine of *Philomena*, quoted above, as follows:

Ande aftir this, when Phebus in his spere
Ouer all the world had sprad his bemes bright,
Cavsynge the cloudes dym for to be clere,
Ande derk[e] mystes enlumnyed with his lyght,
Aboute the oure of sixt then she a-lyght
Ande singynge seet in myddes of the tre:
“Ocy, Ocy, o deth, well-come to me!” (92–98)

A comparison between the Latin and the Middle English reveals that the difference between the two, here, lies primarily in amplification afforded by the formal demands of the meter and rhyme royal stanza.⁹

Beyond a few stanzas and the poems’ basic structures, however, similarities between the two quickly begin to break down, which perhaps seems surprising considering that the Middle English poet declares he is translating the Latin poem, albeit with the caveat, “Yf that my conny[n]ge suffycyent ther-to were” (112). Yet, it is in these differences that we can begin to explore how this fifteenth-century poet perceived Pecham’s poem. For instance, although the story of the nightingale’s death is the same in both, the *Nightingale*-poet treats different subjects in the meditations for the hours. Indeed, this poet seems interested in composing a biblical harmony, as he takes up two subjects for each hour, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. In each case, the actions traditionally were said to have occurred at the given hour. Thus, for lauds, he considers first the Creation and Fall, before meditating on

Jesus's arrest in the garden; for prime, he tells of the waning of Noah's flood and of Jesus before Pilate; for terce, he recounts the destruction of Sodom in Abraham's day in addition to Jesus's being led to Calvary; for sext, he narrates briefly the story of Dathan and Abiram's deaths for opposing Moses before he recounts the crucifixion; and finally, for none, he examines Adam's expulsion from Eden in conjunction with Jesus's death. Though clearly the poet's choice of Old Testament figures is based on biblical typology, his choice also seems based in part on Augustine's division of human time into seven epochs, each inaugurated by a biblical figure or event.¹⁰ Further, the poet includes brief references in each meditation to stages in the life of a human being, from birth at lauds to old age at none.¹¹ In his treatment of the hours, then, the poet expands the passion meditation of *Philomena* to include somewhat commonplace allusions to human time, both historical and individual.

In addition to differences in content, with *Philomena* focusing on the *via mystica* and *The Nightingale* on biblical paraphrase, we find three other particularly significant differences. First, each poet uses direct discourse differently. In *Philomena*, for instance, the bird addresses all her song-prayers to God—or more specifically Jesus—with nary a bow to the reader. In *The Nightingale*, on the other hand, it is just the opposite: all discourse, direct or indirect, seems addressed primarily to the reader. *Philomena*'s songs of praise in the thirteenth-century poem become the nightingale's didactic, at times preachy, biblical paraphrase in the fifteenth-century poem. Second, each poet emphasizes a different chief interpretation of the bird. As suggested above, Pecham primarily considers the bird a figure for the soul seeking Jesus so that at poem's end the bird is last seen embracing him in heaven. The fifteenth-century poet, on the other hand, primarily sees the bird as Jesus for, while in stanza seventeen he includes the human soul, saying the bird "Is Crist hym-self ande euery cristen-man / Soule. . ." (115–16), in the epilogue he states only that the bird is the "blessed lord," who has come "doun to yerth" (394, 395), not a devout soul ascending to heaven. Finally, each poem concludes with a significantly different message. In *Philomena*, Pecham closes with encouragement for his audience "istam novam martyrem. . . imitare" ["to imitate this new martyr"] (87.2), but *The Nightingale*-poet ends with a discourse on the blessed sacrament and a prayer for a share in eternal life. If indeed the fifteenth-century poet is translating Pecham's Latin poem, as he claims, these differences should lead us to question why he seems to have gotten it wrong. Is it simply that he did not know his Latin? Perhaps, but that answer seems too facile. Rather, the answer, at least in part, lies in the ideas of *translatio* that informed

the work of writers such as the *Nightingale*-poet.

In the Middle Ages, theorists and poets often considered translation to involve both a text's movement across linguistic boundaries and its amplification through the translator's creativity. Thus, while many writers followed St. Jerome and Boethius in their role as *fidus interpres* by translating "word-for-word" and "sense-for-sense,"¹² many also were concerned with the poetic invention translation could inspire.¹³ In the preface to his early fifteenth-century metrical translation of Boethius's *De consolacione Philosophiae*, for example, John Walton prays for the grace to translate word-for-word and sense-for-sense, but he is concerned equally with finding the right words to fit the metrical demand of his chosen poetic line.¹⁴ Walton's intent to follow closely his meter indicates his willingness occasionally to forgo literal translation, allowing for more creative, discursive versions of Boethius's text when meter demands.

Chaucer similarly approaches translation as a creative act, though more elaborately. He translates numerous Ovidian stories from the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* in the *Legend of Good Women*, for example, as well as Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* and Petrarch's Sonnet 132 in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the latter translation, Chaucer develops a subtle joke through his narrator and the *auctoritas* of the narrator's fictive source, "Lollius." Immediately preceding the *Canticus Troili* in Book I, the narrator states:

And of his song naught only the sentence,
As writ myn auctour called Lollius,
But plainly, save oure tonges difference,
I dar wel seyn, in al that Troilus
Seyde in his song, loo every word right thus
As I shal seyn; and whoso list it here,
Loo, next this vers he may it fynden here. (I.393–99)¹⁵

Although the narrator declares he will surpass his "auctour" Lollius by translating the very words Troilus sang, in spite of "oure tonges difference," what actually follows is Chaucer's translation of Petrarch's Sonnet 132 (l.400–20). Chaucer expands his source's original fourteen lines to twenty-one and devotes a stanza each to the quatrains and sestet.¹⁶ The learned joke here, of course, is that, while the narrator declares he will translate word-for-word not Lollius but Troilus himself, Chaucer ignores the *fidus interpres* role he gives to his narrator and amplifies Petrarch's sonnet by half.¹⁷ As this passage illustrates, Chaucer consciously composes his poetic translations within the medieval rhetorical

tradition that saw translation not so much as a word-for-word or even sense-for-sense exercise as an exercise in *inventio*.

Rita Copeland has argued that medieval rhetorical theory based on Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana* uses the term *inventio* to denote a method for discovering those things in a text that are meant to be understood.¹⁸ In other words, *inventio* in such medieval theory takes on a hermeneutical aspect; it is one manner of interpreting a text. When translating, poets who follow rhetorical *inventio* often amplify a source text by making explicit what it implies. Turning to *Troilus and Criseyde*, again, we find Chaucer profoundly expanding *Il Filostrato* by overtly drawing on Boethius's *Consolatio*, a text Boccaccio himself implicates in his poem, as Robert P. Miller observes.¹⁹ Such amplification makes translation a unique product of the individual poet and, as in the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*, often an entirely new poem. Understanding the role rhetorical *inventio* plays in medieval theories of translation helps us consider carefully what a writer-translator achieves in translating a text via *inventio*.

Like Chaucer, and his master Lydgate, the *Nightingale*-poet uses rhetorical *inventio* to amplify what he deems important when translating *Philomena*. Rather than following his source word-for-word, he retains its structure, as already noted, but incorporates matter from other sources recognizable to his audience. For example, in addition to reading into *Philomena* elements of the Augustinian division of human time and of the ages-of-man theme, he follows the *York Hours of the Cross* for the focus on the arrest, trial, and torture of Jesus at lauds, prime, and terce respectively.²⁰ The *York Hours*, a popular devotional exercise in late medieval England, most likely would have been quite familiar to his audience. By replacing some of Pecham's details with details from this familiar source, he updates the Latin poem, making it more "relevant," if you will, for his own purposes and audience.

As he significantly alters Pecham's poem, the poet's amplification via *inventio* signals an important aspect of his poetics—that he is a rhetorician as well as poet, who remains closely engaged with the rhetorical situation for which he composes his translation. Though in the prologue the poet offers his poem to "the ryght hyghe and myghty pryncesse, / The Duches of Bokyngham" (3–4), the Duchess herself is not his intended audience. Rather, he gives it to her so she might read it to, as he says,

Suche of hyre peple, that are in lustynesse
 Fresschly encoragynt, as galantus in prime-tens,
 Desyrous for to here the amerouse sentense

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Of the nyghtyngale, and in there mynde embrace,
Who faouere moste schall fynde in loues grace. (10–14)

For these, he hopes, his poem will impart the “gostly sense” (16) of the nightingale and, as he continues, “All loue vnlawfle, y hope, hit will deface / And fleschly lust out of theyre hertis chace” (20–21). Thus, in brief, the poet desires to reform the image of nightingale’s song in the minds of the Duchess’s lusty courtiers from being the harbinger of spring-time love to being, as noted above, an image of Christ crucified preaching the need of spiritual conversion.²¹

Though different from *Philomena* in key ways, *The Nightingale* illustrates the appeal of Pecham’s poem to poets and readers in late medieval England. As the *Nightingale*-poet translates the Latin poem for a courtly audience, he erases the poem’s mystical elements in favor of a didactic approach. The choices the poet makes in amplifying the poem reveal both his own preoccupation with reforming the bird’s amorous image in his audience members’ minds and, albeit indirectly, an interesting record of his reading of the Latin poem. No longer simply imitating Christ, the nightingale becomes Christ preaching about the true significance of her song to an apparently un-mystically minded crowd of lusty courtiers.

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Notes

¹ Otto Glauning, following the manuscript tradition, attributes both poems to Lydgate in his edition, *Lydgate's Minor Poems: The Two Nightingale Poems*, EETS, ES 80 (London: Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1900). The attribution of the second poem remains open, however. See Walter F. Schirmer, *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the Fifteenth Century*, trans. Ann E. Kemp (Berkeley: U of California P, 1961) 181, 281. Hereafter, all parenthetical line references to *The Nightingale* and *A Sayenge of the Nyghtyngale* are to Glauning's edition.

² *The Nightingale* exists in two manuscripts dating from the second half of the fifteenth century: British Library MS. Cotton Caligula A.II (fols. 59r-64r) and MS Corpus Christi College, Oxford, 203 (fols. 1r-21r). *A Sayenge of the Nyghtyngale* also survives in two manuscripts: British Library MS Harleian 2251 (fols. 229r-234v), dating from the third quarter of the fifteenth century; and British Library Additional MS 29729 (fols. 161r-166r), dating from the third quarter of the sixteenth century. The titles for both poems are later scribal additions (see Glauning xi-xvii).

³ Glauning xxxviii-xlii.

⁴ *Rossignol: An Edition and Translation*, ed. J.L. Baird and John R. Kane (Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1978).

⁵ Lydgate draws on *Philomena* for the passion theme but otherwise does not use Pecham's poem.

⁶ Clemens Blume and G.M. Dreves, eds., *Philomena, Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*, vol. 50 (Leipzig: O.R. Reisland, 1907) 9.602. Hereafter, all parenthetical stanza and page number citations are to this edition. Translations are mine.

⁷ "The Via Mystica in John Pecham's *Philomena*: Affective Meditation and Songs of Love," *Mystics Quarterly* 21 (1995): 80-90.

⁸ In stanza five, for instance, he writes:

Igitur, carissime, audi nunc attente,
Nam si cantum volucris huius serves mente,
Eius imitatio spiritu docente
Te caelestem musicum faciet repente. (602)

[Therefore, most dear one, listen now attentively, for if you pre-

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serve the song of this bird in your mind, the imitation of her as the spirit teaches will suddenly lead you to hear heavenly music.]

Pecham's reference to heavenly music surely refers to mystical union rather than death, as I have argued elsewhere ("The Via Mystica in John Peckam's *Philomena*").

⁹ The poet of the Northern French *Rossignol*, on the other hand, follows the original Latin closely throughout, including the four-line stanza and mono-rhyme. Again, to illustrate, stanza nine is a fairly literal translation of the Latin:

A l'eure de miedy que le solail se hauche,
Les vaines li derompent tant forment son chant hauche;
"Ocy, ocy," escrie à vive voix non fausse,
Dont il pert tout son chant et son plaisant chant fausse. (9.64)
[At the hour of mid-day, when the sun is at its height, her veins burst as they form her song so high; "Oci, Oci," she sings with a living voice not false, then she entirely drops her song and her pleasant sound is lost.]

¹⁰ *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1972) 22.30, 1091. In Augustine, the first epoch begins with Adam, the second with the flood, the third with Abraham, the fourth with David, the fifth with the Babylonian Exile, the sixth with Jesus's birth, and the seventh with Jesus's second coming. For a general discussion of medieval theories of human time, see V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1966) 88–100.

¹¹ The poet incorporates a five-part division of the ages of man theme: birth at lauds, childhood at prime, adulthood at terce, middle age at sext, and old age at none.

¹² Charles S.F. Burnett, "Translation and Translators, Western European," *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer, vol. 12 (New York: Scribner's, 1989) 138–40.

¹³ See Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 63–84, 19–230.

¹⁴ Walton writes:

As fro the text that I ne vary noight
But kepe the sentence in hys trewe entent,

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And wordes eke als neigh as may be broght
Where lawe of metir is noght resistent;
This mater wiche that is so excellent
And passeth bothe my cunnyng and my myght
So saue it lord in thy gouernement
That kannest reformen alle thing to right.

(*Boethius: De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Translated by John Walton, ed. Mark Science, EETS OS 170 [London: Oxford UP, 1927] 3.1–8, 1–2)

¹⁵ Chaucer citations follow *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987).

¹⁶ A comparison illustrates Chaucer's method. Petrarch's first stanza of Sonnet 132 reads:

S'amor non e, che dunque e quel ch'io sento?
Ma s'egli e amor, per Dio, che cosa e quale?
Se bona, one'e l'effetto aspro mortale?
Se ria, ond'e si dolce ogni tormento?
[If not love, then what is it that I feel?
If it is love, good God, what kind of thing?
If good, why does the effect smite and sting?
If bad, why does the torment sweetly steal?]
(Petrarch, *Sonnets & Songs*, trans. Anna Maria Armi [New York: Pantheon, 1946] 216–17)

Chaucer's translation in *Troilus and Criseyde* reads:

"If no love is, O God, what fele I so?
And if love is, what thyng and which is he?
If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?
If it be wikke, a wonder thynketh me,
When every torment and aduersite
That cometh of hym may to me savory thinke,
For ay thurst I, the more that ich it drynke." (I.400–06)

Translating the first three lines rather closely, Chaucer expands Petrarch's one-line treatment of love's "sweet torment" into three and "invents" a striking image of love sickness: love's unquenchable thirst.

¹⁷ H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., raises similar issues in his deconstructive reading of this passage ("Oure Tonges *Differance*: Textuality and Deconstruction in Chaucer," *Medieval Texts & Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987] 15–26).

¹⁸ *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 154–58.

¹⁹ Miller states, “Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* is a fairly close rendition of the *Filostrato*. His most obvious addition to this source, though it is one he never names, is the material drawn from the *Consolation of Philosophy*, making explicit Boccaccio’s implied Boethianism” (*Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* [New York: Oxford UP, 1977] 314). Although she does not address amplification as an aspect of translation, Jane Baltzell’s discussion of amplification as a rhetorical strategy is illuminating (“Rhetorical ‘Amplification’ and ‘Abbreviation’ and the Structure of Medieval Narrative,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 2 [1967]: 32–39).

²⁰ *York Hours of the Cross, The Lay Folks Mass Book*, ed. Thomas Frederick Simmons, EETS OS 71 (London: Oxford UP, 1879) 82–85.

²¹ In *A Sayenge of the Nyghtyngale*, Lydgate similarly attempts to reform the image of the bird, but for a different purpose. Instead of a group of courtiers, his naive narrator needs to be instructed in the meaning of the bird’s song. In the poem’s prologue (20–35), the narrator mistranslates the song as pertaining to the love represented by the Venus and Cupid of courtly love poetry, that is, the sensual Venus of the medieval mythographic tradition (see Bernard Silvestris, *Commentary of the First Six Books of the “Aeneid,”* ed. Julian Ward Jones and Elizabeth Frances Jones [Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1977] 9; and Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Book of Theseus*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy [New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974] 199). This mistranslation sets up the remainder of the poem, which in offering a true translation of the bird’s song serves to correct the narrator (and presumably like-minded readers).