Translating Troy

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COMMENTS ON Hilary the Confessor’s translation of the Greek Psalms into Latin, Jerome applauds Hilary’s translational practice, claiming that, “quasi captiuous sensus in suam linguam uictoris iure transposit” [like some conqueror, he marched the original text, captive, into his own language]. ¹ For Jerome, translation is an imperial act that captures and reinterprets its object for a superior and, in his case, a Latinate culture. This imperial logic behind translation is the dominant understanding throughout the medieval period for translating Latin texts into the vernacular. Yet, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, the alliterative romancers who adhere to the historiography of Guido delle Colonne qualify their translations with caveats for the dangers of the very activity for which they are employed. Their misgivings about nation and empire formation become not only full-scale repudiations of the translations of power (translatio imperii) from Troy to Rome to Britain, but also incisive interrogations of the translations of knowledge (translatio studii) that accompany them. Their provincial politics resist the machinery of English imperialism, which drives the iteration of textual authority from the clerical and Latinate to the lay and Anglophone. Paradoxically, these alliterative romancers implicitly

critique the practice of translation in the midst of engaging in that very practice.

In this conclusion, I synthesize my examinations of alliterative romance to characterize what I call a “clerical voice” that runs throughout these texts in opposition to the transfer of imperial authority from Troy to Britain and the movement of textual power from the clergy to the lay aristocracy. Since the alliterative romanciers defy precise identification, I turn to the examples of John Trevisa and Geoffrey Chaucer as late-medieval English figures whose perspectives on translation, alliterative poetry, nationalism, empire formation, and the relations between the clergy and the laity more fully contextualize the literary and historiographic projects of alliterative romance. I begin with a reading of Trevisa’s translation of Ranulph Higden’s *Polychronicon* to demonstrate not only the traditional negotiations between translators and their patrons, but also the way such relationships are theorized and called into question. As a translator committed to the provincial historiography of Higden, Trevisa exhibits a mediated skepticism about the Galfridian praise of Arthur and a surprising preference for the alliterative poetic style, a proclivity which, I conclude, reflects the sensibilities of his clerical class and his educational training in the *ars dictaminis*, the art of letter writing. Trevisa’s affinity with the alliterative poets and his ambivalence about Arthurian prophecy make his perspective on empire formation and clerical and lay aristocratic relations as proximate to that of these alliterative romanciers as I believe is possible to identify.

In contrast to Trevisa’s coded critique of lay aristocratic culture, I address the work of Geoffrey Chaucer and specifically his *Troilus and Criseyde*, since this well known Trojan text plays a significant role in English cultural imperialism. Even though Chaucer draws on Guido’s *Historia* in this courtly romance, his engagement with Trojan history is markedly indifferent in comparison to that of the alliterative romanciers. The work of courtly love, rather than militaristic history, is the central concern, which makes this poem and his other works more susceptible to absorption within the textual fabrications of the subsequent Lancastrian imperial project. As a poet whose works bolster English claims to literate authority, Chaucer is more readily fashioned by John Lydgate and other fifteenth-century writers into an “imperial author” who possesses the cultural capital capable of elevating the English nation to worldly prominence. Chaucer ultimately satisfies the sensibilities and interests of the aristocracy through his clerical critiques and providential historiography, which differ from the clerical voices and retrospective historiography of these alliterative romanciers. Given Chaucer’s literary success among the culturally elite, it is no surprise that the work of these alliterative
poets fell into relative obsolescence. To the alliterative romanciers, the translation of empire, in its service to aristocratic authority, is a “plague of great destruction” for which there is no remedy besides a recursive awareness of the treacherous origins that belie all such pretensions to sovereignty.

TREvisa’S ALLItERATIVE POLITICS

The notion that translation could be “destructive” defies predominant medieval and modern assumptions about the “universal” nature of translation. To many translators, translation includes rather than excludes and unifies rather than separates. In other words, the translation of language or culture makes that language or culture available and usable to more people. The act of translation accordingly became a valuable tool for ancient conquerors in their communications with and eventual appropriations of conquered peoples and cultures. Early imperial cultures, especially those of Rome, expressed their authority and values through the translation of texts; they even viewed the act of translating as an act of conquering. By translating the ancient vernaculars of Hebrew and Greek into Latin, they made what was once foreign familiar, disseminating another culture’s knowledge to a new, and therefore, wider audience. This perspective on translation not only gave the Roman Church in the Middle Ages license to convert Latin from pagan to sacred status, but also firmly established the relationship between the translation of language and the propagation of empire that came to be known as the translatio imperii et studii. By making Latin the language of the Western church, Latin assumed a universal identity, which created coherence among cultures and geographies that operated under very different mores. Latin became both the language of empire and the church, making it a vehicle of sovereignty and knowledge that had no equal throughout the Middle Ages.

By the late fourteenth century in England, Latin’s role in the “translation of learning and empire” was still embraced in theory, but the rise of English as a language of theological and courtly stature complicated the status of Latin as linguistic conqueror of culture. In the 1380s, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower preferred English to the standard languages of poetry, Latin and French, in composing some of their greatest works for courtly audiences. A number of translation projects were also undertaken by clerks such as

2. Robinson, Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche, 10.
3. Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde is addressed to the court, and may have been specifically written for Richard II’s Queen Anne. See John Livingston Lowes, “The Date of Chaucer’s Troilus
as John Trevisa, who prefaces his rendering of Higden’s *Polychronicon* with a dramatization of the conversation that might have (and very well could have) occurred between the clerical translator and his aristocratic patron.  

This *Dialogue Between a Lord and a Clerk Upon Translation* addresses the tension between Latin and English, clerics and aristocrats.  

While the Lord’s argument for translation emerges victorious, the Clerk’s trenchant critiques of aristocratic practice and attempts to translate Latin learning into the vernacular are nonetheless persuasive. To understand the Clerk’s argument, it is important to know that Trevisa’s rhetorical model for the *Dialogue* derives from another text he translated, the pseudo-Ockham *Dialogus inter clericum et militem*. The fact that both Trevisa’s *Dialogue* and this *Dialogus* are appended to every manuscript of the *Polychronicon* solidifies their intimate organizational and thematic relationship. At the literal level, they both not only privilege the voice of the aristocrat, but also express anticlerical views. In the *Dialogus*, the Soldier subdues the Clerk by claiming sovereignty and disendowing clerics who do not merit property. Likewise, in the *Dialogue*, the Lord’s victory in the debate suggests that clerics must relinquish their exclusive rights to Latin texts by making them available to secular society. Since the Soldier and the Lord occupy the same power positions, it is clear that Trevisa envisions the clergy as submissive to two interdependent, and possibly indivisible, levels of aristocracy: knights and patrons.

What makes Trevisa’s unexceptional equivalency of knights and patrons and degradation of the clerical voice so compelling is the fact that he is translating from a historiographic tradition that resists pretensions of the secular elite. As I established in chapter five, Higden writes from a provincial perspective that remains skeptical about English nationhood, particularly its claim to Arthurian origins. For the alliterative romancers of this book, both Higden’s chronicle and Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia destructionis Troiae and Criseyde,* *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 23, no. 2 (1908): 285–306. He suggests that “Right as oure firste letter is now an A” is a compliment to Queen Anne. See also J. S. P. Tatlock, “The Date of Troilus: And Minor Chauceriana,” *Modern Language Notes* 50, no. 5 (1935): 277–96. Richard II asked Gower to write *Confessio Amantis* in English. See Michael Bennett, “The Court of Richard II and the Promotion of Literature,” in *Chaucer’s England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992), 3–20, at 7.


5. All subsequent citations of the *Dialogue* and its corresponding epistle refer to the line numbers of the following edition: Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

serve as helpful source texts in their critiques of imperialism and warfare. Some of the anti-nationalistic material in the *Polychronicon* would have been difficult for Trevisa to render for a patron who conceived the project as one that would supplement the efforts of such imitable English figures as King Alfred, Cædmon, and the Venerable Bede (100, 103, 105). Yet, in his epistle to Lord Berkeley, he pledges that in his translation “the menyng shal stonde and nught be ychaunged” (148). Such a statement implies that Trevisa will remain faithful to both his source text and the demands of his patron. As I demonstrate below, this pledge proves to be impossible to uphold because of the delicate dance Trevisa must perform in translating an ecclesiastical text for lay aristocratic readers.

In the manner of the alliterative romanciers, Trevisa employs erudition and subtlety to present a text that is both pleasing to his audience and consistent with his clerical viewpoint. While the Lord appears to have egalitarian goals in making the chronicle available to “moo men” (26–27), his desire to translate the *Polychronicon* into English is motivated by the lay aristocratic interest in the elevation of English as a language of authority through manuscript production and the fine book trade. As it turns out, if we follow the reproduction and dissemination of this text, “moo men” actually means “more wealthy men.” Six copies of Trevisa’s translation appear in finely wrought early fifteenth-century manuscripts that were most likely written and illuminated in London.

Ronald Waldron adds, “Their de luxe character suggests that they were designed for a baronial market, . . . [a] restricted circulation . . . among the wealthy and bibliophile.” Therefore, the

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translation of the *Polychronicon* makes it more accessible and readable not for the entire lay population, but for a new and no less exclusive audience who has the socioeconomic means to produce and circulate books. In other words, the Lord’s egalitarianism disguises his push for a transfer of knowledge and literate authority from the clergy to the nobility.

Likewise, the Clerk undercuts his accession to his patron’s wishes by privileging his ecclesiastical identity through surprisingly alliterative rhetoric: “Than God graunte us grace graithely to gynne, wit and wisdom wiseliche to worche, myght and mynde of right menyng to make translacioun trusty and trowe, plesyng to the Trinite, thre persones and oon God in mageste, that ever was and ever shal be” (127–30). The language not only establishes a biblical framework, the viewpoint of the church, on the secular history of the chronicle, but also departs from the “more easy and more pleyn” (125–26) prose that the Lord requests. In fact, the crowded syntax of the sentence and its alliterating units transform the requested prose into the alliterative verse so prevalent throughout northern England.\(^\text{10}\) And to defy the notion that his interest in alliteration is just a brief anomaly, Trevisa begins his corresponding letter to Lord Berkeley in alliterative prose:

Welthe and worship to my worthy and worshipful lord Sir Thomas, Lord of Berkley. I, John Trevysa, youre prest and youre bedman obedient and buxom to worche youre wille, holde in hert and thenke in thought and mene in mynde youre medeful menyng and speche that ye spake and seide that ye wold have English translacioun of Ranulph of Chestres bokes and cronycles: therefore Y wolde fonnde to take that travail and make English translacion of the same bokes as God grauntith me grace. For blame of bakkiters wol Y not blynne, for envye of enemyes, for evel spighting and speche of evel spekers wol Y nought leve to do this dede, for travayle Y wol nought spare. Comfort Y have in medeful making and plesing to God, and in witynge that Y wote that it is youre wille. (131–41)

In playfully alliterating both the concluding prayer in the *Dialogue* and the salutation to his epistle, Trevisa highlights his interest in England’s native verse. Based on the evidence of glosses in manuscripts containing Old English texts, Dorothy Bethurum asserts that “interest in Old English in the West Midlands was not spasmodic antiquarianism but must have run a steady course to the end of the Middle Ages.”\(^\text{11}\) And given the Lord’s invocation of


King Alfred in the *Dialogue*, Waldron may be correct in characterizing this alliterative prose as Trevisa’s nod to the Alfredian tradition in Wessex.\(^\text{12}\)

While this acknowledgment of King Alfred’s translation program is plausible, I want to suggest that Trevisa’s use of the alliterative line is more evocative of the clerical voice of the alliterative poetry of his own era. As Waldron admits, there is no evidence that Trevisa knew Alfred’s preface to *Pastoral Care* or the Old English texts that he cites. It would have even been possible for Trevisa to draw exclusively from Higden for his knowledge of the Old English corpus.\(^\text{13}\) In fact, Trevisa’s alliterative prayer, and specifically the section “God graunte us grace graithely to gynne, wit and wisdom wiseliche to worche” (127–28) is more stylistically and structurally similar to the Middle English alliterative poetry of the north. Compare Trevisa’s line to John Clerk’s opening prayer in the alliterative *Destruction of Troy*: “Now god of þi grace graunt me þi helpe / And wysshe me with wyt þis werke for to ende” (3–4). The correspondences in vocabulary (God/god, graunte/graunt, grace/grace, wit/wyt, worche/werke) and the organization of the alliterative units suggest that Trevisa’s prayer originates in a formula used by alliterative poets.

It is also likely that Trevisa’s educational training in Latin prose style directly influenced his employment of alliteration. As David Lawton and Ian Cornelius have argued, the rhythms of alliterative writing are equivalent to the dactylic and spondaic cadences of *dictamen*, the secretarial and bureaucratic practice of letter writing.\(^\text{14}\) While the purpose of teaching the *ars dictaminis* was primarily to train future clerks in the rhetorical structures of the letter (such as the salutation, the securing of goodwill, the narration, the petition, and the conclusion), attention was also paid to *cursus* or cadence, a method of rhythmical signature that was described in some

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\(^{13}\) Ibid. Alfred is the focus in the beginning of Higden’s Book 6 and all the other famous “men and moments” in the history of translation cited with Alfred in the *Dialogue* are treated by Higden as well: 2.4.6 (Septuagint), 2.6 (Babel); 4.18 (Aquila, Symmachus, Theodocion, and Origen), 4.29 (Jerome); 5.32 (John the Scot). For these and future references to Higden’s text, see *Polychronicon, Together with the English Translation of John of Trevisa and an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Churchill Babington and Joseph R. Lumby (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869).

dictaminal manuals as a means of authentication.\textsuperscript{15} No evidence exists that would convincingly confirm that the stress patterns of alliterative writing directly imitate the \textit{cursus}, but as Cornelius suggests, their rhythmical similarities elevated the prestige of English alliterative texts.\textsuperscript{16} In fact, the prologue to the fourteenth-century alliterative devotional treatise, \textit{A Talking of the Love of God}, includes a direct reference to \textit{cursus}: “Men schal fynden lihtliche this tretys in cadence” (16).\textsuperscript{17} This description of alliterative rhythm as “cadence,” or the “cadentia” of \textit{dictamen}, suggests explicit links between alliterative b-verse patterning and the clause endings of \textit{cursus}.\textsuperscript{18} And since this dictaminal training flourished in late fourteenth-century Oxford, when and where Trevisa received his university education, it is no surprise that we see the arts of alliteration and letter writing merge in his epistle to Lord Berkeley.\textsuperscript{19}

Trevisa’s immersion in the \textit{ars dictaminis} would have likely been accompanied by exposure to a number of literary models of prose style, including that of Guido delle Colonne. As Martin Camargo has shown, an advanced canon of Latin texts, which served as an extension of the standard curricular \textit{Liber Catoniani}, supplemented dictaminal instruction in late-fourteenth century Oxford. This set of literary models included Alain de Lille’s \textit{De planctu naturae}, Jean de Limoge’s \textit{Morale somnium Pharaonis}, Richard de Bury’s \textit{Philobiblon}, and Guido’s \textit{Historia destructionis Troiae}. Camargo suggests that “it is highly probable that they clustered together as a set of models from which two or three might be chosen to accompany one or more treatises on prose composition and, optionally, treatises on verse composition as well.”\textsuperscript{20} This provocative speculation suggests that affinities between Latin prose and alliterative poetry may not have been limited to their concussive cadences. Indeed, the alliterative romances of this book indicate that Guido’s content, his skeptical historiographic model, may have been attractive as well.

If, for example, we consider John Clerk’s prologue to his translation of Guido’s \textit{Historia}, we find clear evidence of Clerk’s own educational training in Latin prose conventions. The typical structures and language of the aca-

\textsuperscript{16} Cornelius, “Cultural Promotion,” 3.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{A Talking of the Love of God}, in Wogan-Browne, Watson, Taylor, Evans, eds., \textit{The Idea of the Vernacular}, 223.
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demic *accessus*, formulaic prologues that accompany Latin academic texts, rise to the fore in Clerk's discussion of his sources, his “intent,” and the Trojan “matter” at hand.\(^{21}\) Given the fact that Clerk's poem is a close translation of Guido's popular Latin text, one he likely encountered within an academic context, we might expect his prologue to replicate the *accessus* of his source. As Cornelius points out, however, “John Clerk is here more faithful to the standard Latinate vocabulary of the *accessus* than his Latin source is.”\(^{22}\) After discussing the historical fidelity of poets, Clerk turns to his Trojan material using language specific to the academic prologue: “Now of Troy forto telle is myn entent euyn” (27). The invocation of his “entent” is a direct reference to the conventional *intentio auctoris* or “intention of the author,” which does not appear in Guido's text.\(^{23}\) And to place his prologue firmly within the genre of the academic *accessus*, Clerk prefaces the first book with the rhetorical “Meue to my mater” (98). The English “mater” refers to the *materia libri* or “subject-matter of the book,” which serves as a cue to the reader that the crucial textual material or story is about to begin. If Guido's *Historia* had been a central text for Clerk's education, as it likely was for Trevisa, such a treatment of Guido in concert with academic *auctores* would have been a perfectly natural consequence of reading his text alongside those of the *Libri Catoniani*.

When we consider the critiques of imperialism that emerge in Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*, it becomes evident that Trevisa fits the skeptical intellectual profile of these alliterative romancers. His alliterative epistle and prayer that preface his translation establish a clerical voice so often expressed by John Clerk, the *Siege of Jerusalem*-poet, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*-poet, and the *Gawain*-poet, who embed their critiques of warfare, empire, and nationalism through this rhythmical form. Likewise, Trevisa uses alliteration to assert values of the ecclesiastical class within a translation intended to please the sensibilities of an aristocratic one. Such a deliberate foray into this rhythmical form suggests that if Trevisa were not required to translate the chronicle in prose, he may have chosen alliterative poetry.

After all, just as Trevisa establishes in the preface to the chronicle that he works at the behest of Lord Berkeley, John Clerk identifies an aristocratic patron in the opening folio of the *Destruction of Troy*. He promises that in the thirty-sixth book he will provide both the “nome of the knight þat causet it to


\(^{22}\) Cornelius, “Cultural Promotion,” 77.

be made / & the nome of hym that translatid it out of latyn in to englysshe.” Clerk fulfills his promise to identify himself as the translator, albeit cryptically, but leaves out the name of his knightly patron, an interesting and suggestive omission given Trevisa’s similar dilemma of translating anti-aristocratic material for an aristocratic audience. As products of the Guido-tradition, John Clerk and Trevisa’s texts exhibit what James Simpson has identified as “a division of power between aristocrats and the learned, whom I shall call ‘clerics’; this recognized division of power allowed clerics a permissible voice that is trenchantly opposed to aristocratic military, martial, and bureaucratic practice.”

Because we have no biographical information for the alliterative romanciers, Trevisa and his translation of the Polychronicon provide the most analogous information about the respective clerical positions of the alliterative poets and their aristocratic texts. Through an examination of his translation, we can begin to understand the way the alliterative poets negotiated between the desires of their audiences and their own anti-imperialistic tendencies.

Trevisa’s momentary indulgence in the alliterative line at the end of the Dialogue is the first indication that his translational practice will not adhere to his vow to remain faithful to the text and the intentions of his patron that the text be made “easy” and “plain” (125–26). Instead of vernacularizing the text, as the Lord desires, Trevisa insists on retaining the Latinity of his source by importing Latin words directly into his English translation. For example, he inserts the Latin “fando” to demonstrate its etymological relationship to the English “fable,” a clarifying practice that he repeats throughout the translation to ensure that his audience understands a word’s meaning and pronunciation (2.18, 2.26). Likewise, he refers to Latin in his explanation of the acrostic that spells out Christ’s name in the Sibyl’s prophecy: “The heed letters of these thre vers, and of the othere as they beeth i-write in Latyn, speleth this menynge: Ihesus Crist, Goddess one, Savyour” (2.23). This latter use of Latin as an acrostic to disguise a name is also used by Higden to identify himself as the author of the Polychronicon, a technique that John Clerk employs in the Destruction. Such Latinate erudition does not comply with Lord Berkeley’s desire for Trevisa to English the text for a lay population that has little to no Latin, and instead pleases the sensibilities of what Christopher Baswell has called Trevisa’s “clerical cohort.”


rum institutis et observantiis” (1.25) and “De schiris Angliae, siue prouinciis” (1.49), and refers to sources, authors, and important figures in Latin. Virgil is “Virgilius,” Isidore is “Isidorus” and Horace is “Horacius”; and when Trevisa cites Isidore’s tenth book of the *Etymologies*, he writes “Eth. libro decimo” (1.1). Furthermore, names and places often appear in Latin, as is evident in the following sentence: “at the laste that lond highte Italia of Italus, rege Siculorum, kyng of Sicilia, and is the noblest prouince of al Europa” (1.23). Trevisa’s Latin does not overwhelm the text or readers such as the Lord, who know some Latin, but Trevisa’s insistence on retaining his clerical language places a Latinate veneer on an Englished text, which reveals his defense of the ecclesiastical possession of textual knowledge.

In addition to the problem of offending clerics opposed to translation, Trevisa faces the difficulty of rendering a diplomatic translation of a text that interrogates the Arthurian heritage of his baronial audience. Higden is famously critical of Geoffrey of Monmouth, particularly in his praise of Arthur, since the Galfridian account does not concur with the Roman, French, and Saxon histories, notably that of William of Malmesbury (5.6). In response, Trevisa interrupts his translation and inserts an objection to his source that likely pleased his aristocratic audience: “Here William telleth a magele tale with oute evidence; and Ranulphus his resouns, that he meveth ayenst Gaufridus and Arthur, schulde non clerke move that can knowe an argument, for it followeth it nought. Seint Iohn in his gospel telleth meny thinges and doynges that Mark, Luk, and Matheu speketh nought of in here gospelles, ergo, Iohn is nought to trowynge in his gospel” (5.6). By equating William and Higden’s argument against the existence of Arthur with the argument that Saint John speaks falsely because he addresses matters that do not appear in the other gospels, Trevisa condemns their reasoning as a kind of Arthurian heresy. Clerical readers would have found this analogy humorous, especially since Trevisa presents his objection by shifting into hypothetic syntax and deductive argument characteristic of Latinate sentence structure. While members of the ecclesiastical class may have perceived this irony, it is likely that Trevisa’s defense of Arthur would have been accepted by his aristocratic audience, who, as Baswell suggests, “had a real if indirect stake in English territorial ambitions, which were supported by myths of Arthurian empire.”26 Yet, these Arthurian origins were as attractive as they were potentially threatening to the Anglo-Norman nobility, since both the Normans and the Welsh laid claim to this ancestry. For Lord Berkeley, this contention for Arthurian identity would have been particularly acute since

26. Ibid., 183.
he owned territory in Gloucestershire by the Welsh March. Trevisa therefore has to take great care to present Arthurian origins in a way that does not privilege one particular ethnic line or promise the future glory of the Britons.

As is the case for the Morte-poet, who resists the fantasy of Arthur’s return by emphasizing his undignified death, Trevisa prefers a more historical Arthur and critiques the Galfridian prophecy that suggests Arthur will come again to redeem the Britons. Employing the same language that he used to lambaste Higden and William, he claims that it is “a ful magel tale . . . that Arthur schal come ageh, and be eft kyng here of Britayne” (5.6). By arguing for Arthur’s existence and arguing against Arthur’s return, Trevisa engages in the retrospective historiography of the alliterative romancers, who both establish Arthur’s place in British ancestry and critique Arthurian fantasies of empire. As Baswell suggests, Trevisa’s contradictory stance on Arthur either “reject[s] Arthur outright or preserve[s] him as a redeemer of the Britons. Either version cuts into the imperial sentiments or local land tenure of Trevisa’s baronial patron and his class.”

Trevisa cleverly belies the Arthurian ambitions of his audience by inserting satiric objections and historical exegesis that are consistent both with his clerical identity and his alliterative politics.

By coupling an examination of Britain’s Arthurian identity with the Lord’s justification of translation in the Dialogue, Trevisa ensures that his audience will recognize the stakes of his Englishing of the Polychronicon for both the clergy and the lay aristocracy. Essentially, the Lord’s approach to translation is a microcosmic application of the translatio imperii et studii that seeks justification and empowerment of English nobility through descent. Just as Higden tells the story of the world from creation up until the English present, the Lord perceives his patronage as the most current moment in the history of translation that stretches back to the earliest translation of scripture. Because of his perception of his authoritative position in universal history, Emily Steiner contends that the Lord both conceives of translation as a cultural operation of the nobility and understands lordship as the theoretical basis for translation. She adds, “This is not just to say that translatio studii

depends upon and is enabled by *translatio imperii*. It is to say that translation acquires meaning and purpose within the history of aristocratic generation and possession, within a history, which, for the Lord, is a history of Englishness itself.”\(^{29}\) As a deed that both imitates powerful predecessors such as Charles the Bald and Alfred the Great and disseminates knowledge of England’s sacred and secular past to the laity, the commissioning of translations expresses and justifies the Lord’s lay sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the continuous emergence of Trevisa’s clerical voice—manifesting itself in the words of the Clerk, in the Latinate diction of his translation, and in his opposition to Arthurian prophecy—highlights the important part the clergy plays in the textual production and empowerment of the lay aristocracy. As the *Dialogue* suggests, clerks must embrace their roles as academic laborers for the aristocracy to maintain any agency within such a transfer of knowledge and power to the laity. Trevisa’s resistant voice, which also characterizes the voices of these alliterative romancers, reflects the anxiety that he and the rest of his “clerical cohort” might be excluded from the epistemological sphere of textual authority and sacred history, which had previously been their exclusive domain.\(^{30}\) Hanna claims that this fear of exclusion is especially acute in the *Dialogue*, where “[t]he clerical hope of retaining secular power, of keeping Ranulph Higden’s history the exclusive property of a Latinate community, is routed by the Lord’s insistence upon the rights of secular readership.”\(^{31}\) The implication of Trevisa’s anxiety about the attenuation of the clergy’s role is that he writes from a position that belies not only the values of the lay aristocracy, but also vernacularity itself. His defense of Latin as a universal language, which the Clerk makes plain in claiming that it “is so wide iused and iknowe” (33), suggests that he perceives translation as making textual knowledge more, not less, exclusive. Such a stance is counterintuitive, but when we consider the inextricable relationship between the translation of language and the translation of power expressed in the *Dialogue*, Trevisa’s Arthurian interpolations, and the fine book trade, the movement of textual authority from all of Latin Christendom to an elite population of lay aristocrats in Northwestern Europe indeed flouts the Lord’s claim to disseminate knowledge to “moo men.”


\(^{30}\) See also Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66, 100.

\(^{31}\) Hanna, “Sir Thomas Berkeley and His Patronage,” 895; Steiner, “Radical Historiography,” 190.
THE CLERICAL VOICE IN ALLITERATIVE ROMANCE

Trevisa’s insertion of a clerical voice within the production of an aristocratic text is consistent with the methods of the alliterative poets of the Guido-tradition, who were faced with the same translational project and historiographic viewpoint. For instance, if we turn back to the *Destruction*, we find a consistent privileging of anti-war and anti-imperialistic views characteristic of much clerical discourse. During the Trojan military counsel that Priam convenes to decide whether or not to go to war against the Greeks, two influential voices emerge clearly as those opposed to the campaign. The most prominent is famously that of Hector and the other is that of his brother, the priest Helenus. Using the anachronistic Christian language of the church, John Clerk describes Helenus as if he were an English clergyman, and (possibly an insertion by the scribe Thomas Chetham of the Hunterian MS V.2.8) even labels his anti-war speech as “The counsel of Elinus the Bysshop.” In defiance of the earlier calls to war, Helenus boldly advises:

\[
\text{I know me so konyng in the clene artis} \\
\text{Thurgh giftes of god . . .} \\
\text{Therefore puttes of this purpos Let Paris not go.} \\
(2484–85, 2492, 2499–500)\]

[I am versed in the knowledge of the divine arts through gifts of God. . . . Therefore, put off this purpose and do not let Paris go.]

By invoking his “giftes of god,” Helenus preaches his homily as one endowed with a divine mandate to warn his fellow Trojans about the destruction that will ensue from their bellicosity. The Trojan refusal to follow his counsel and their subsequent defeat retrospectively casts Helenus as a clerical authority who spoke the divine truth and took an ethical stance against war.

Likewise, if we turn to the *Siege of Jerusalem*, we find the clerical voice similarly authorized through a critique of imperialistic excess. In this poem, St. Peter himself appears on the scene as the ecclesiast who converts Vespasian (205–12) and verifies the Vernicle’s holiness. Veronica’s prostration before his feet best reflects his position of reverence:

And when the woman was aware that the cloth was owned by Saint Peter the Pope, she fell flat on the ground, embraced his feet and said to the man: “I give the protection of this veil and my body to you.”

Such a dramatic acclamation of the “pope” praises Veronica’s piety as imitable, but the newly baptized Romans demonstrate no such deference to Peter. In fact, the Romans seek no counsel from Peter in their exaction of the siege of Jerusalem. Rather, as Bonnie Millar puts it, “[e]ssentially St. Peter does the bidding of Vespasian, coming when summoned and responding as he is told.” Vespasian irreverent treatment of Peter is significant because, as I have demonstrated, the Roman preference for imperial rather than salvational power is ultimately called into question through the Siege-poet’s compassion for the fate of the Jews and his condemnation of the Roman cruelty in performing the siege. Like Helenus, Peter’s ecclesiastical authority is justified through the lack of respect he is accorded by those with excessive secular interests.

Finally, if we examine the two Arthurian alliterative poems, the Morte Arthure and Gawain, we again find a preference for the clerical over the aristocratic. After the papacy relinquishes its authority over Rome and agrees to consecrate the imperial sovereignty of King Arthur in the Morte (3176–90), Arthur experiences a vision of his downfall during his dream of the Nine Worthies (3218–455) and then reacquaints himself with a knight dressed as a pilgrim, Sir Craddock, who testifies to the reality of Arthur’s doom. Sir Craddock’s appearance is significant not only because his news turns Arthur’s attention back to Britain, but also because Craddock’s religious conviction demonstrates the danger of privileging secular over spiritual interests. Before recognizing him as one of his knights, Arthur warns of the danger he faces in passing through this war-strewn region. In response, Craddock says:

I will noghte wonde for no werrre to wende whare me likes,  
Ne for no wy of this werlde þat wroghte es on erthe,  
Bot I will passe in pilgremage þis pas vnto Rome,  
To purchese me pardonne of the Pape selfen,  
And of the paynes of Purgatorie be plenerly assoyllede.  
Thane sall I seke sekirly my souerayn lorde,  
Sir Arthure of Inglande, that auenaunt byerne. (3494–500)

[For no war will I turn away from traveling where I wish, nor for no man of this world made on this earth, but I shall pass in pilgrimage at this pace unto Rome to purchase a pardon from the Pope himself, and of the pains of Purgatory be perfectly absolved. Then, shall I seek straightaway my sovereign lord, Sir Arthur of England, that able man.]

By privileging his pilgrimage to Rome and his meeting with the Pope over his loyalty to his lord Arthur, Craddock justifies papal sovereignty. Voicing the clerical perspective of the poem, Craddock’s preference for Christian piety reveals Arthur’s excessive devotion to empire.

The description and action of the Morte-poet’s “clerical” knight is consistent with the Gawain-poet’s characterization of Sir Gawain, who seeks penance in the midst of a court more concerned with heraldic glory. As Ad Putter suggests, Gawain’s piety and embodiment of clerical values is a “translatio of the traditional bellator and his way of life into an ideal of the courtly knight who is pacified, well-mannered, and diplomatic.”36 Moreover, his obsession with somatic mutilation and wholeness, as represented by the sign of his “surfet” (2433) and anxiety about his impending decapitation, cast Gawain as a knight well versed in clerical discourse about the mortification of the flesh and the resurrection of the body.37 When Gawain displays the “bende of þis blame” [band of this blame] (2506) or scar on his neck to his fellow knights, he not only reveals his own sin, but also reinvokes the sacred power of wounds, which had been earlier represented by the Five


Wounds of Christ in the pentangle of his shield (642–43). If the Gawain-poet shares the Augustinian background of the Siege-poet, he may have been particularly influenced by the passage from The City of God, which suggests that the wounds of martyrs may be retained in the afterlife: “Non enim deformitas in eis, sed dignitas erit, et quaedam, quamvis in corpore, non corporis, sed virtutis pulchritudo fulgebít” [For in the [wounds] will not be a deformity, but a dignity, and a certain beauty shall shine forth in the body, although it will be of virtue, not of the body]. Gawain’s wound therefore possesses the potential to instruct its viewers, even if this religious teaching is ultimately lost upon its audience in the Round Table. What matters most to his fellow knights is the retention of his head, proof of his chivalry and a reaffirmation of potential glory of Britain. Unlike their Trojan ancestor Laomedon, who lost his head at the hands of Hercules in the Destruction (1339), Gawain has blissfully retained his. The girdle’s newfound heraldic identity allows the court to elide the clerical in favor of the aristocratic, a sensibility that is belied by the Gawain-poet’s return to the ashes of Troy (2525), suggesting that both a historical and clerical lesson have been misinterpreted. The inimitable examples of Sir Craddock and Sir Gawain suggest that even within the realm of secular romance, the alliterative Arthurian voices of reason are markedly clerical.

**CHAUCEER’S TROJAN HISTORIOGRAPHY**

As I have been suggesting, the continuity between past and present that the translatio imperii demands is in direct contrast to the clerical perspectives that emerge from the Guido-tradition, which emphasize the ruptures and the dangers of translations of power that occur from Troy to Rome to England. Contrary to the prevalent attacks of avaricious clerics found in the most famous fourteenth-century alliterative poem, William Langland’s Piers Plowman, these alliterative romancers critique the bellicosity of imperialists such as Arthur and affirm the diplomacy of priests such as Helenus. The thematic link between these alliterative romances is the fall of Troy, a figure that does not appear in Piers Plowman. This suggests that like Langland the alliterative romancers perceived the alliterative line as an appropriate medium of social critique, but unlike Langland they interrogated the figure of Troy as an historical subject and aristocratic object.

What should we then make of Chaucer, a poet who largely eschews alliterative rhythms, but also uses the figure of Troy from Guido’s *Historia* as the subject for his own romance *Troilus and Criseyde*?

While Chaucer cannot usefully be called an alliterative poet, he does employ alliteration judiciously and exhibits a clear awareness of the vibrant capacity of the alliterative line to replicate the pace and violence of battle scenes. Chaucer provides an alliterative skirmish during “The Legend of Cleopatra” in the *Legend of Good Women* (637–49), but none of these lines follow the standard rule of the regular alliterative line, which dictates that the first three stresses of a four stress line alliterate. In another battle scene in his *Knight’s Tale*, however, he adheres to the conventional rhythm in two lines, “Ther shyveren shaftes upon sheeldes thikke” (2605) and “And he hym hurtleth with his hors adoun” (2616), demonstrating an awareness of traditional alliterative formulae and their appropriateness for gritty descriptions of martial conflict. This precise use of alliteration, however, reflects a more aesthetic than political use of the line, the latter of which may be more distinctive of the alliterative poets of the Guido-tradition.

Nevertheless, even Chaucer alliterates Guido’s text. As Stephen Barney points out, Chaucer makes a momentary swerve into alliterative verse in his description of Hector and his fellow Trojan warriors in the beginning of Book 4 in *Troilus and Criseyde*:

Ector, and many a worthy wight out wente,  
With spere in hond and bigge bowes bente;  
And in the herd, with-oute lenger lette,  
Hir fomen in the feld anoon hem mette. (4.39–42)

Although the alliteration once again appears within a martial context, it fails to follow the classic formula and instead alliterates haphazardly, stressing three and then two words at either the ending or the beginning of the lines. Since Chaucer likely composed his *Troilus* before many of the alliterative romances of the Guido-tradition, he may have been unfamiliar with their standardized rhythms, but his alliteration of a scene in which Hector and his


band meet the Greeks in battle may have inspired John Clerk, who apparently knew Chaucer's *Troilus*, to render Guido's text in alliterative verse.\(^{42}\)

It is clear, however, that Chaucer and the alliterative romanciers used Guido's *Historia* for divergent purposes. Since Chaucer's main concern is the pain that accompanies courtly love, his Trojan historiography is remarkably ahistorical. When faced with the significance of Troy's fall, he states:

> But how this town com to destruccion  
> Ne falleth naught to purpos me to telle;  
> For it were a long digression  
> Fro my matere, and yow to long to dwelle.  
> But the Troian gestes, as they felle,  
> In Omer, or in Dares, or in Dite,  
> Whosso that kan may rede hem as they write. (1.141–47)

For Chaucer, the writing of history is a digression from the matter at hand that would interrupt his complaint against love. Moreover, he refers readers to authorities whose accounts are either unavailable or contradictory in historical content and methodology. Homer's poems were known by reputation alone and, according to John Clerk, that reputation was not a good one. Homer's epics included material about gods fighting men, an account inconsistent with that of Dares and Dictys, who claimed to have witnessed Troy's fall. At the end of the poem, Chaucer validates the eyewitness account of Dares in yet another evasion of history:

> And if I hadde ytaken for to write  
> The armes of this ilke worthi man,  
> Than wolde ich of his batailles endite;  
> But for that I to writen first bigan  
> Of his love, I have seyd as I kan,—  
> His worthi dedes, whoso list hem here,  
> Rede Dares, he kan telle hem alle ifeere. (5.1765–71)

Once again, Chaucer deflects from his narrative a treatment of the martial material that fascinates the alliterative romanciers. Even though Chaucer and these alliterative poets share an interest in Troy, their dedication to Trojan historiography differs greatly.

In addition to Chaucer’s distaste for the historical is his skepticism about the clerical. We could certainly turn to his Canterbury Tales for ample evidence to support a Chaucerian critique of the ecclesiastical class, but more germane to the subject at hand is his treatment of the figure of the Trojan cleric. I believe it is appropriate to consider the ways Chaucer critiques the Trojan clerks as English ones since Chaucer has been known to engage in Trojan allegoresis. Most notably, previous scholars have observed that the Trojan Parliament of Book 4 is a political commentary on the Wonderful Parliament of 1386. For Chaucer’s clerical commentary in this romance, the most important priest is not Helenus, but Calkas, whose defection to the Greeks creates the eventual dilemma for Criseyde. Calkas is described as a “gret devyn” or augur who foreknew through astronomy and from Apollo that Troy would be destroyed (1.66–70). In contrast to Helenus who gains his divine knowledge in the Destruction “from the clene artis / Thurg giftes of god” (2484–85), Chaucer uses a clever pun to claim that “Calkas knew by calkulyng” (1.71). The suggestion that Calkas dabbled in the “dark arts” to maneuver his way into safety is confirmed just a few lines later where he is condemned as a “traitour” (1.87). Even the Greeks who accept him question his fidelity. Diomede worries that Calkas will

lede us with ambages—
That is to seyn, with double wordes slye,
Swiche as men clepen a word with two visages.— (5.897–99)

The fear of Calkas’ “ambages” or “ambiguities” suggests a greater paranoia about the divine knowledge that such a Trojan cleric possesses. By placing Calkas at the center of the plot of treason, Chaucer expresses ambivalence about such clerical authority.

Chaucer’s elusion of a direct engagement with the historical Trojan origins of his aristocratic audience and his acerbic view of clerical knowledge


44. As Christopher Cannon notes, Chaucer’s use of “ambages” is interesting because it only occurs once in his works and has a telling linguistic history. The word is actually Latin for “winding or circuitous paths” but also has an etymological relationship to “ambiguitas.” Both the Ad Herennium and Geoffrey of Vinsauf define it as a term that “belies its appearance” (haec vox transvertit visum). “Chaucer’s Style,” in The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer, eds. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 233–50, at 246; Harry Caplan, ed., Ad Herennium (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 4.53.75ff; Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Poetria Nova, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1967), 1545–48.
are merely two factors that made *Troilus and Criseyde* and his other works more susceptible to Lancastrian absorption in the fifteenth century. With the exception of his close circle of friends within the servant culture of the court and London, Chaucer did not gain much of a literary reputation during his lifetime, but after 1400 the proliferation of his texts led to his achievement of the Lancastrian title of “the noble rethor Poete of breteine” in Lydgate’s “The Life of Our Lady.” This newfound popularity meant that Chaucer’s circumscription of history ironically led to his direct involvement in it. By deferring history in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer participates in a forgetting of the past, a crucial act in nation formation that gained fanfare from none other than Henry V. Such a literary amnesia about the tortuous origins of English nobility inspired Henry V to patronize Trojan textual production. In an effort to support his royal lineage and bolster English’s claim to literary authority, he not only commissioned John Lydgate to produce a *Troy Book*, a work as dependent upon Chaucer as it is upon Guido, but also commissioned a vellum copy of *Troilus and Criseyde* for his personal library while he was Prince of Wales. The larger result of this patronage of Chaucerian texts was a proliferation of his works; *Troilus and Criseyde* survives in sixteen fifteenth-century codices and *The Canterbury Tales* in fifty-five. Moreover, the fact that Chaucer produced a particularly francophone English poetry made his works more pleasing to the French-speaking elite. Not only did his Hainault wife most likely converse in French both at home and in the company of Queen Philippa of England, who supported such French writers as Jean Froissart, but also Chaucer was conversant with French as a bureaucratic language for state affairs. Chaucer’s ability to please the sensibilities of an imperial and francophone culture enabled his works to rise to a state of reverence in the fifteenth-century.


The imperial and linguistic currency of Chaucerian works among the elite contrasts greatly with the northern verse of the alliterative romanciers, whose formulaic rhythms and provincial historiography fell into relative obscurity. Even though Richard II may have participated in an effort to empower the Northwest Midlands and the Cheshire dialect, the belated movement was no match for Chaucer’s London idiom, which was used extensively within the city’s populace, government, and commerce. The fact that Chaucer did not participate in the so-called Alliterative Revival or translate earlier Anglo-Saxon works displays a lack of interest in native folklore, provincial literature, and ethnic Englishness. Rather than engage in bold critiques of the translatio imperii, Chaucer even went so far as to participate in such Lancastrian fabrications of lineage and royalty. For instance, in his last stanza of To His Purse, Chaucer asserts Henry’s sovereignty through the invocation of his Trojan heritage:

O conqueror of Brutes Albyon,
Which that by lyne and free eleccion
Been verray king, this song to yow I sende. (22–24)

In addition to the gratuitous claim that Henry had been elected by the people, Chaucer affirms Henry’s place in the “lyne” of “conqueror[s]” occupied by “Brutes” and his Trojan ancestors. Chaucer’s disciple John Lydgate echoes this argument for lineage in the prologue to the Troy Book:

The eldest sone of the noble Kyng
Henri the Firthe, of knyghthood welle and spryng . . .
In sothefastnesse, this no tale is,
Callid Henry ek, the worthy prynce of Walys,
To whom schal longe by successioun
For to governe Brutys Albyoun. (95–96, 101–4)


51. For a full analysis of Chaucer’s contribution to Lancastrian claims, see Strohm, “Saving the Appearances,” 21–40.
The replication of Chaucer’s characterization of Henry as the rightful inheritor of “Brutys Albyoun” confirms Chaucer’s centrality within a larger movement of English cultural imperialism in the fifteenth century.

The return to Lydgate is apt since my analysis of alliterative romance began with a comparison of his translation of Guido’s *Historia* with that of John Clerk. This comparison situates Lydgate within an imperial program relatively distant from John Clerk’s provincial skepticism, a sensibility shared by his northern contemporaries, the *Siege*-poet, the *Morte*-poet, and the *Gawain*-poet. Their anonymity is a mystery that will likely never be solved, but it is nevertheless striking how their resistance to the *translatio imperii* remains consistent throughout their poems. In each case, Troy appears either literally or figuratively as an origin recuperated for imperial fabrications, a revival that incurs great losses for the sovereigns and their victims. Even though Chaucer shares this obsession with Troy, his engagement with its destruction is indifferent and tangential to his concern with the trials of courtly romance. His agenda is by no means imperialist, but his affirmation of triumphalist historiography in *To His Purse* suggests that his commitment to the ethics of warfare and empire-building is lukewarm, at best. We cannot conclude that Chaucer disliked the rough sound of the alliterative line, but we may be able to say that he avoided the unsavory message that it often bore.

**The Manuscript Evidence.** The clues within the texts themselves, the dependence on Latin sources, and Trevisa’s representative example suggest that these alliterative romanciers were clerics who produced texts for noble patrons or readers with aristocratic pretensions. They realized that English translation empowered the laity and disenfranchised the clergy, but they resisted this call for clerical reform. By undercutting aristocratic claims to empire, these alliterative romanciers called the logic of the *translatio imperii et studii* into question, suggesting instead that such a transfer of power from Troy to Rome to England and the concomitant transfer of knowledge from Latin to English would result in Guido’s “plague of great destruction.” Within an imperial culture that continually looked into the future to prophesy England’s greatness, these alliterative romanciers attended to the treachery, destruction, and sacrifice of the innocent that served as the origin for English claims to empire. The result is a Trojan genre of alliterative romance that not only expresses great ambivalence about warfare, imperialism, and English nationhood, but also quietly implies that the rise of English as a language of authority may come at a great cost.