

# A COMPANION TO MEDIEVAL TRANSLATION

Edited by  
**JEANETTE BEER**

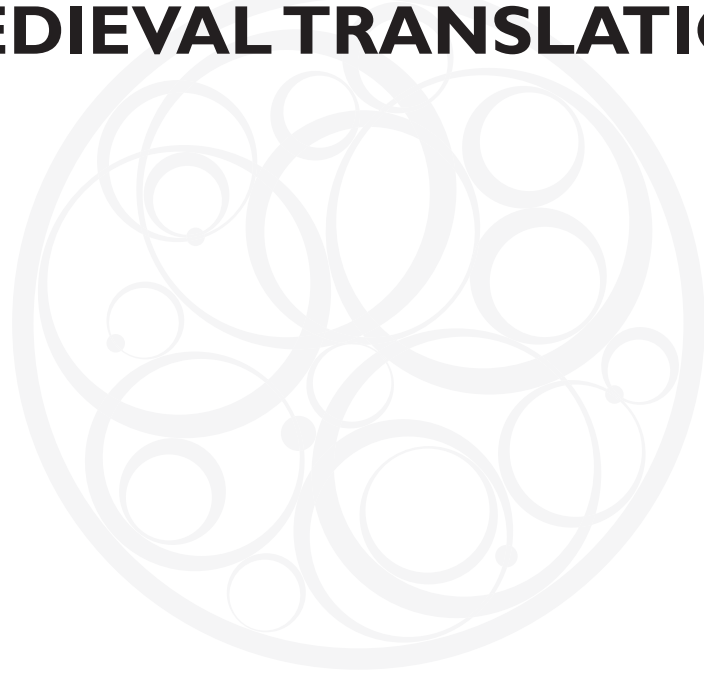


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## MEDIEVAL CONVENT DRAMA: TRANSLATING SCRIPTURE AND TRANSFORMING THE LITURGY

MATTHEW CHEUNG-SALISBURY, ELISABETH DUTTON, AND OLIVIA ROBINSON<sup>1</sup>

At the centre of medieval Christendom in the West was the Latin Vulgate Bible, to varying degrees inaccessible to the many people—the laity, *conversi*, and some women religious—who received little or no Latin training and who, even if they could recite passages of Latin liturgy, sometimes had only the most pragmatic understanding of the language, in the most specific liturgical contexts.<sup>2</sup> Vernacular drama was a particularly effective tool for teaching Scriptural narratives and their Christological significance, at the same time as encouraging appropriate affective responses in an audience of believers; vernacular drama also offered a gloss on the biblical stories that were the primary influence on the Latin liturgy. This chapter considers a specific example in which biblical material moves through time and space through the medium of dramatic representation in the fifteenth-century medieval convent; it will explore the outcomes of the interpretation and transformation of scripture through its translation into dramatic form, and consider the adaptation and transmission of the resulting material into the seventeenth century.

Like civic Scriptural drama, nuns' plays translated Vulgate Latin into the vernacular in order to teach biblical

narrative; also like civic drama, but perhaps to an even greater degree, convent drama referenced liturgical elements to explain their function. The objective of the liturgy was the worship of God and petition directed heavenward: medieval congregations may not have contributed to its words or action but they were thoroughly engaged in the intention of the celebration. Medieval plays complicate neat distinctions between performers and spectators that characterize later theatre,<sup>3</sup> and convent plays blur distinctions between actors and audience much further, as in some cases there may have been nobody watching who was not also performing, and if there were "audiences" then their responses—active, as well as affective—were integrated into the work of the plays. Scriptural plays written and performed by medieval nuns necessarily differed from plays written for the medieval city street because they were performed in contexts that were inaccessible to the general public, and free from the influence of civic authorities for whom public playing was an opportunity for the display of power and prestige. While convent plays share their Scriptural sources with civic drama, they differ in giving a greater role to women when translating the masculine-dominated stories of the Latin Vulgate. Convent plays appear, in some cases, to have been performed extra-liturgically and are not habitually discussed, therefore, within the tradition of liturgical drama.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to assess, from the surviving evidence, how common convent drama was in the Middle Ages, but it is clear that the practice was not restricted to one order nor

<sup>1</sup> The research presented in this chapter was undertaken with the financial support of the FNS (Fonds National Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique), grant no. 100015\_165887.

<sup>2</sup> Recent socio-linguistic work has begun to explore the sheer variation in bi- or multi-lingual aptitude, knowledge and practical usage which existed in the Middle Ages, and to emphasize the importance of attending to the specific local linguistic behaviours of individuals and communities in different contexts: see, for example, the themed essays introduced by Baswell "Introduction: Competing Archives, Competing Histories." On medieval English nuns, their Latin literacy, and what "literacy" might signify in this context, see Zieman, "Reading, Singing and Understanding."

<sup>3</sup> On the interplay between actor and audience and translation in medieval drama, see Dutton, "Henry Medwall's *Fulgens et Lucres*."

<sup>4</sup> On the problematic definition of "liturgical drama," see Petersen, "Liturgical Enactment."

to one region or country: plays survive from Benedictine, Carmelite, and other religious houses from Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, and England.<sup>5</sup>

As this chapter will discuss, the nuns' work not only sought to bring to life texts primarily experienced in the canonical Latin context of the Vulgate, but also shaped the ways in which participants interacted with that authorized material, as well as the liturgical and doctrinal glosses on it. Translation, then, in this context, may be related to theatre in three ways: firstly, in the translation of biblical stories from page to stage, and (more conventionally) from Latin to vernacular; secondly, in translation of the liturgy, that is both glossed and incorporated into the dramatic action; thirdly, in the translation of the plays themselves for performance, from the specific context for which they were written to different times, spaces, and audiences. It seems that the nuns who created and adapted these scripts were thinking not simply as translators of Scriptural and liturgical texts but specifically as translators for the theatre.

### Translating Scripture and Liturgy in the Fifteenth Century

Translation for dramatic performance presents very particular challenges and opportunities. A new language is a new context, as is a new geographical or social location or a new historical moment; the translator, often in a different time and place from the author, must carry meaning from one language to another, for a reader also remote in time and place from the author, and perhaps from the translator, too. But "sense" is not conveyed only in words, and when words are dramatically performed, meaning is also mediated by the voices and gestures and physical appearance of the actors, by costumes and props, by lighting and sound effects, and by the architecture, decoration and facilities of the venue as a whole. Theories of translation in contemporary theatre often assume a "gestural subtext" encoded in a script that is brought out in performance by the actors, with the help of directors and designers; the translator carries responsibility for transmitting the subtext intact by reflecting the "performability" or "speakability" of the text translated. However, as Susan Bassnett discusses, these theories attribute too much defining power to the text, and therefore too much responsibility to

the translator of that text. For Bassnett, the "gestural text" is not fixed immutably in a script, and therefore cannot be simply translated when the script is translated: translation is just one part of a performance, and many other parts of the performance, particularly its cast and production team, contribute to the creation of meaning relatively independently of the translator.<sup>6</sup>

The translator of drama therefore has to cede control of the meaning of the translated text to many intermediaries; while dramatic performance offers distinctive opportunities to control meaning by controlling the context in which a text is received, the translator, according to Bassnett, is responsible only for "the linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of the text that are decodable and re-encodable,"<sup>7</sup> not for the entire gestural text. At the same time, and especially if a translator works for a particular production, knowing where and when the translated text will be performed, and by whom, perhaps for whom, that translator may well be influenced by the idea of a performance while translating. This should be not eschewed but embraced: furthermore, Bassnett concedes that the translated text might be enriched if the translator subsequently confers with actors, bringing the experiences and ideas of another "part" of the ultimate performance into the translation process. The recent Modern French Pléiade Shakespeare translations are examples of this—"script for script" translations comprising "texts for the French theatre which have been tested in practice with attention to the experience of actors and directors."<sup>8</sup> The convent plays discussed here, as they render Latin Scripture into vernacular drama, also reveal traces of "script for script" translation.

Chantilly, Musée Condé MS 617 is a late fifteenth-century play manuscript copied in the Carmelite convent of the Dames Blanches at Huy, in modern Belgium, where at least some of the plays it contains were probably performed. Its linguistic particularities, as Cohen has shown, situate it in the Walloon region. Its female scribe, Sister Katherine Bourlet, signs her name twice in the manuscript (*Explicit per manus Bourlet*, f. 7v; *Suer Katherine Explicit Bourlet*, f. 27v), and can be identified as a late fifteenth-century member of the convent: she appears in the surviving school accounts (as does her sister, Ydon) and her mother is listed as a donor and friend in the

<sup>5</sup> On the Italian tradition of convent drama, see Weaver, *Convent Theatre*. On the tradition in Spain, see Surtz, *El libro del conorte* and *The Guitar of God*.

<sup>6</sup> Bassnett, "Translating for the Theatre," pp. 435–38 and "Theatre and Opera," pp. 96–103.

<sup>7</sup> Bassnett, "Still Trapped in the Labyrinth," p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Morse, "Reflections in Shakespeare Translation," p. 80.

convent's surviving Obituary.<sup>9</sup> The manuscript contains five plays, two of which render Scriptural narrative in vernacular French. The first of these plays (hereafter "Chantilly 1") covers Nativity material, including the Shepherds' and Kings' visits to Jesus; in the second play (hereafter "Chantilly 2") Herod plans the Massacre of the Innocents and his revenge on the three kings. Chantilly 2 also presents Saint Anne, Mary Salomé, and Mary Jacob visiting the Holy Family: the interpolation of this non-Scriptural episode seems to be an element of adaptation to a cast and audience of female religious, as it surrounds the infant Christ with his female line—his mother and her two sisters, and his grandmother.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the second Chantilly play incorporates the Purification of the Virgin; this Purification is incomplete in the manuscript and seems to have been revised to reduce the role of Simeon. The manuscript shows that Chantilly 1 and 2 were revised and adapted by their copyists, and episodes were moved around and abbreviated.<sup>11</sup> It seems likely that the re-orderings and revisions witness to adaptations made in response to practical challenges such as changes of cast or venue, or performance brief, as the plays were additionally translated into different contexts: they might fruitfully be considered "script-for-script" translations.

Chantilly 1 features a Prologue, which declares that the performance is to the honour of the Virgin Mary, and to bring pleasure to the present company: the Prologue refers to the performance as a "jeux" and asks the audience for a little silence:

En l'honneur de Dieu tout puissant  
et sa mere Marie, la royne des angele,  
unc jeux vos veulhe comenchire  
por resjoir la bonne companignie.  
Si vos prie tresdouche suers, humblement,  
que unc pitit de silenche  
Nos veulhies presteir iusque en la fin

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of some of the manuscript's linguistic features, see Doudet, Beck, and Hindley, *Recueil general de moralités d'expression française*, vol. 1, pp. 332–45, 477–84, and 531–44. These and other linguistic explorations take as their starting-point Cohen's edition of *Mystères et Moralités du ms. 617 de Chantilly* in which he commented that the linguistic interest of the plays was "supérieur à [leur] valeur littéraire," p. cxlvii, and to which he devoted extensive discussion. More recently, as Doudet, Beck, and Hindley note (*Recueil general de moralités d'expression française*, pp. 332–33), linguists have questioned some of Cohen's conclusions, particularly his claim to be able to localize to a particular town the Walloon dialect used in the plays.

<sup>10</sup> See Robinson, "Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 617."

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, "Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 617," pp. 98–111.

et vos veireis le jeux comenchire.

(ed. Cohen, lines 1–8).

(In honour of God, all-powerful  
And his mother, Mary, the queen of angels,  
I wish to begin a play for you,  
For the enjoyment of this good company.  
And I pray you, sweet sisters, humbly  
That a little silence  
You might lend us, until the end  
And you will see the play begin.)<sup>12</sup>

The Prologue in early theatre is particularly associated with commercial aspects of theatre that are presumably irrelevant in the case of the nuns' performance, so its appearance may be surprising in a convent play.<sup>13</sup> The Prologue builds a bridge between audience and actors, explicitly acknowledges the present reality, the "here and now," through her explicit address of the audience, while at the same time ushering in the play-world that is about to commence. The audience are not invited to imagine themselves in the times and places of Scriptural history; Joseph and Mary speak immediately after the Prologue, but they say nothing about stables or Palestine or a Roman census. Mary defines the time in terms of Christ's coming:

l'heure est venue maintenant  
que ie doie enfanteir mon enfan.

and the place in universal terms:

vos soies le bien venu à monde,  
de ciel en terre.  
(ed. Cohen, lines 12–13, 22–23)

(The hour is come now  
In which I must give birth to my child  
May you be welcome in the world,  
From heaven to earth.)

Thus the play presents the time and place of the Nativity eschatologically, and brings the action to the audience, who are encouraged to respond to it as immediate truth. Audience response is guided in various ways. Keen to create female roles within the Scriptural narrative, the nuns introduce Alison and Mahai, female shepherds who also visit the infant Christ and offer him gifts.

<sup>12</sup> This and other translations are our own unless otherwise indicated. Italicizations within our citations represent Cohen's expansions of scribal abbreviations within the Chantilly manuscript.

<sup>13</sup> See Sergi, "Beyond Theatrical Marketing," and Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England*, pp. 81–119.

**Eylison** Or sus, damme Mahay  
 prendeis ung aingneal gras;  
 nos laisorons chi nos brebis,  
 en la garde de l'enfant petis.

**Mahai** Et abien! trèsdouche compaignie!  
 Allons y, nos deux ensemble;  
 nos laisserons trotteir douant  
 les jollis pasteur de renon.  
 Nos en yrons apres le pitit pas,  
 festoiir et conjoir la mere et l'enfant.  
 (ed. Cohen, lines 112–21)

(Now, let's go, lady Mahay  
 Take a fat lamb,  
 We'll leave our ewes here  
 In the care of the little child.  
 Well, sweet companion,  
 Let's go both together,  
 We'll let the good shepherds  
 Run ahead.  
 We'll go after them slowly  
 To celebrate and rejoice with the mother  
 and child.)

The shepherdesses are given only this brief cameo moment, but their lines perhaps model the intended devotional response of the audience of nuns, who should imaginatively accompany the shepherds of the Christmas story as they visit the mother and child, and honour them. The Chantilly plays also explicitly stage audience response through the lines of "the People": after the shepherds have adored Christ and sung "glorieux dieu *qui fist*," "le peuple" ask the Shepherds to explain the marvellous events:

*Le peuple az pastore:*

**Peuple** Entre vos, pastore et bergier,  
 nos vos prions *que* nos diseis,  
 queil chose meruelleuse veyut aveis  
 par coy si grant ioie demynés,  
 et qui est cils qui soy est apparuit.  
 (ed. Cohen, lines 132–36)

(*The people to the shepherds:*  
 Between you all, shepherds,  
 We beg that you tell us  
 What marvellous thing you have seen,  
 Why you display such great joy,  
 And who this is who has appeared.)

In the complete absence of stage directions we can only imagine how this was staged, but it seems likely that "the People" speak from the audience, as the congregation speak

from the pews in the liturgy. The Chantilly audience are thus encouraged to engage with the Shepherds as the earliest eyewitnesses to the birth of Christ.

The passages that are *not* translated into the vernacular, but instead are left in Latin, are perhaps the most helpful indicators of the purpose of these plays and the context of their production. In Chantilly 1, the Latin citations indicate a clear engagement with liturgical text, but the ontological status of such liturgically-attuned drama must be informed by the idea that rather than enforcing a separation between worship and dramatic representation (following modern dramaturgical convention), we ought to see (as the original practitioners did) that the plays were embodied realizations of Scripture and liturgy which sought to bring past acts (the events of Scripture as much as past moments in worship) into dialogue with the present. What, then, might the liturgical allusions in Chantilly 1 signify?

In Chantilly 1's representation of the Nativity, Mary and Joseph adore the infant Jesus (Mary: "O sire vos soies le bien venu à monde / de ciel en terre por le salut des homme [...] / Je vos adore comme mon createur / dieu et homme et mon fils, de monde salueur" (ed. Cohen, lines 22–27) (O sire, may you be welcome in the world / from heaven to earth for the salvation of men [...] I adore you as my creator, god and man and my son, saviour of the world). Here their worship serves as a model for the devotion demanded of the play's participants. In the case of the "Gloria in excelsis deo" uttered by the angel to the shepherds, the play offers an unforgettable link between the dramatic representation and the text, whenever participants might subsequently hear it, either at the Gloria of the Mass or in the particular context of the exclamation at the Nativity in Scripture.

In Chantilly 1's representation of the Visitation of the Magi, the Latin speeches of the three kings make explicit reference to the liturgical texts for Epiphany, forging a further link between the remembered Scriptural precedent, the liturgical observance of the feast (which makes use of the passages from Scripture), and the dramatic gloss on both, which contains both textual cues and physical representations. Importantly, the kings themselves represent the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 60, which forms the textual backbone of most of the liturgical Epiphany texts: "The kings of Tharsis and the islands shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Saba shall bring presents, and all the kings of the earth shall worship him, and all the nations shall serve him. All shall come from Saba, bringing gold and incense, and announcing praise to the Lord."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Translated from the Epiphany text in the Carmelite Ordinal, Lambeth Palace MS 193.

In Chantilly 1, Jasper declares: “Hoc signum magni regis est. Eamus et inquiramus eum et offeramus ei munera: aurum, thus, et mirram” (ed. Cohen, lines 374–77). (Here is the sign of a great king. Let us go and enquire after him, and offer him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh): these lines echo the text of the Magnificat antiphon at Vespers of the Epiphany, which precedes them with the words: “Magi videntes stellam dixerunt *ad invicem*” (the Magi, seeing the star, said to one another *in turn*), missing from Jasper’s speech in Chantilly 1.<sup>15</sup> The play, however, embeds the missing part of the Magnificat antiphon in the action that is witnessed onstage when the kings reach Jesus, as each king speaks to the baby “in turn,” in a carefully structured, tripartite gift-giving scene. Jasper’s citation of the Magnificat antiphon is, furthermore, immediately followed by a prayer like a collect:

O souverain dieu le pere tout puissant  
 nos vos prions et humblement supplions  
 qui nos donneiz vostre grasse et et benediction  
 affin que veoir et adoreir vostre chire enfan  
 puissions  
 et en la fin de nos jour auoir saluacion.  
 (ed. Cohen, lines 378–82)

(O sovereign God the father, all-powerful  
 We pray and humbly beg you  
 That you might give us your grace and  
 benediction  
 So that we might see and adore your dear child  
 And in the end of our days possess salvation.)

The placement of this prayer, directly after the text of the Magnificat antiphon, echoes the structure of a liturgical book. The construction of this scene therefore translates the particular patterning or ordering of texts commonly found in liturgical books into onstage practice.

Jasper’s “Hoc signum” might be heard a few times in other offices throughout the day of Epiphany. Further Latin exclamations by Jasper and Melchior within this scene—“Adorate deum”; “adorate dominum alleluia” (worship God, worship the Lord, alleluia)—are perhaps in Latin to remind us that their actions are referenced in other liturgical material. Balthasar proclaims, “de mon or agrant plante / Luy voraie de bon cuer presentier” (of my gold a great amount / I wish with all my heart to present to him), and the words “Omnes de Saba ...” follow (ed. Cohen, lines 436–39). Another responsory

for the Epiphany, this time from Matins, reads: “*Omnes de Saba venient aurum et thus deferentes et laudem domino annuntiantes*” (*All from Saba shall come, bringing gold and frankincense, and announcing praise to the Lord*). If, as is likely, this is what the words “Omnes de saba” refer to, it serves as a recapitulation and liturgical re-wording of what has been said and performed in the vernacular.

The three kings help participants in the play to understand how the prophecy of Isaiah 60 has been fulfilled, and also to draw a connection between the dramatic representation and the long-established proper texts of the liturgy. The liturgical text, as part of the play, helps to bring the distant birth of Christ, and the events explored in the well-known liturgical texts, into the present, transforming and translating them for the participant. The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled before the participant’s eyes, and the play becomes part of an intertextual panoply of images, texts, and experiences which link salvation history to personal experience.

One of the most familiar passages of the medieval liturgy is the *Nunc dimittis* (Luke 2:29–32), which serves as the Gospel canticle at Compline. *Nunc dimittis* and the other canticles, the *Benedictus* at Lauds and the *Magnificat* at Vespers (also drawn from Luke), form a self-contained account of humanity’s reaction to the Incarnation: a celebration of the coming of the Messiah, a recognition of his acts, and a thanksgiving for the Incarnation that will save the whole world. Chantilly 2’s incorporation of the Purification presents the narrative source of the *Nunc dimittis*—Simeon’s words when Jesus is first presented in the Temple. However, the words of Simeon that survive in the script are not those of the *Nunc dimittis* itself but rather a translation of the Scriptural narrative surrounding it: Simeon is a man “*iustus et timoratus expectans consolationem Israel*” (just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel) who has been told by the Holy Spirit that “*non visurum se mortem nisi prius videret Christum Domini*” (he should not see death until he had seen Christ the Lord).<sup>16</sup> The Chantilly Simeon declares

[Car] j’aie oyut reuelacion,  
 par la diuine promission,  
 que jamais morte ne gosteraie  
 se je n’aie tenus | entre mes bras  
 le fils de dieu en char humain[e].  
 (ed. Cohen, lines 85–89)

15 Robinson, “Feminizing the Liturgy,” pp. 80–84.

16 Luke 2:25–26. Cf. *Biblia sacra juxta vulgatam versionem*, p. 1609.

[[For] I have heard a revelation  
By divine promise  
That I would never taste death  
Before holding in my arms  
The son of God in human flesh.)

But, although he addresses God (“O souverain dieu,” line 74; O sovereign God, for “Domine”) and declares that his desire will today be accomplished (“J’araie ajourdhuy mon desire | accompli,” line 75; I will today have accomplished my desire), that accomplishment is, he says, the sight of the sweet Virgin with a child in her arms: “vechy la douce vierge, dont parrolle Ysay / quj son fils, entre ses bras, / porte à temple presentair” (see here the sweet Virgin, of whom Isaiah speaks, who takes her son in her arms to present him at the temple; ed. Cohen, lines 76–78). This is in no way a translation of the continuation of *Nunc dimittis*, which talks instead of a light to enlighten the Gentiles—“viderunt oculi mei salutare tuum ... Lumen ad revelationem gentium, et gloriam plebis tuae Israel” (My eyes have seen your salvation ... A light to be a revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel).<sup>17</sup> Rather, it is a glossing interpretation of the *Nunc dimittis*’s words, an interpretation that identifies this light with the infant Christ, and, moreover, an interpretation that invokes not the immediate gospel passage with its prophecy that Simeon will see Christ, “Christum domini,” but the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, which tells of a sign, “signum,” that “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” So the play offers neither the Latin of the canticle nor a translation of it, but rather a sort of vernacular exegetical commentary on its context. However, it is also true that the play appears incomplete, and that two cancelled lines in the manuscript offer the stage direction: “*Et pues symeon s’agenolle deuant Marie en adorant Ihesucrist*” (ed. Cohen, stage direction to line 93; *And then Simeon kneels before Mary, adoring Jesus Christ*). It is at least possible that this cancelled direction indicates a performance in which Simeon used the words of the *Nunc dimittis* as his adoration, and that these words were so familiar that they did not even need to be more explicitly indicated.

We would argue further that the words put into the mouth of Simeon, rather than the familiar ones of the *Nunc dimittis*, are a precise and unmissable reference to the liturgical texts prescribed for the Carmelite Office on the feast of the Purification. Although no liturgical manuscripts from Huy have come down to us, a wide range of other Carmelite

manuscripts consulted follows (for the Epiphany and for the Purification at least) the prescriptions in the early fourteenth-century Ordinal of Sibert of Beka. This Ordinal, the text of which is best preserved in London, Lambeth Palace, MS 193, was conceived by its author, then the Carmelite Provincial of Lower Germany, as the model for all subsequent Carmelite liturgical books and the exemplar against which they were to be compared.

All of the manuscripts consulted contain, within the Purification office, no fewer than seven citations of the passage from Luke, “iustus et timoratus ... etc,” while the passage “non visurum se mortem ...” also appears four times. Thus, it seems that the play is in fact a gloss on the Carmelite liturgical texts, rather than on the canticle that is so closely associated with the story of Simeon and the infant Jesus. The emphasis on his human qualities and piety may have helped participants to identify with the character Simeon whose words they chanted every day at Compline, and whose life and actions bespoke an ideal relationship with the Messiah: Simeon, like enclosed nuns, was consecrated to service in the temple of God and never left it.

Chantilly 1’s episode of the Magi preserves liturgical passages, untranslated in Latin, in contrast to the vernacular dialogue in which they are embedded. The vernacular dialogue explains the meaning of the Latin that is spoken, functioning as a gloss, or perhaps more as a commentary. It seems here that the play encourages the audience to recognize Scriptural narrative from which the liturgical words are taken: after watching the play the audience, remembering the resonance of these words experienced in a dramatic context, will imaginatively recreate that informing context on next hearing the Latin passages in church. For this reason, it is important that the liturgical Latin is spoken within the vernacular text—to orientate the audience and train their memories. The juxtaposition of Latin citation and vernacular gloss also helps to show the differences between a play and a liturgical celebration, whilst revealing the two to be different expressions of the same reality. Whereas the kings’ liturgical statements are mostly indicated by incipits only in the manuscript, Jaspar’s declaration cited above, “Hoc signum ... mirram,” is written out in full, probably, as Robinson argues,<sup>18</sup> to distinguish it from another liturgical chant with incipit “Hoc signum”: “Hoc signum crucis erit in caelo cum dominus ad iudicandum venerit” (Here is the sign of the cross [which]

<sup>17</sup> Luke 2:30–32.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, “Feminizing the Liturgy,” p. 83.

will be in the heavens when the Lord comes to judge), most usually sung during Matins on the feast of the *Discovery of the Holy Cross*. The importance of distinguishing between these two incipits as directions to the performers is clear: it is also clear, however, that the shared incipit might serve suggestively to connect the star, a sign of a great king, with the cross that is also, though rather differently, a sign of Christ the King.

Many medieval plays presenting Christ's birth create iconographical anticipations of his sacrificial death, drawing on Scriptural hints. The myrrh that is given to the baby Jesus is a precious ointment used for embalming dead bodies; the shepherds who visit the baby suggest the image of Christ the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Simeon prophesies not only the salvation of Israel and the Gentiles but also the suffering that will be necessary to that salvation—and a sword, he says, shall pierce Mary's heart, too. This Scriptural prophecy is dramatically foregrounded, for example, in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 133's *Presentation in the Temple*, copied ca. 1512.<sup>19</sup> Because of the abbreviation of Simeon's role in the second Chantilly play it is impossible to know how the nuns treated this, but within the first play as it survives, the symbolism of the words "hoc signum" is layered by the deliberate translation of Latin liturgical citation into the script, and by the careful construction of Simeon's subsequent speech in Chantilly 2. When the two plays are placed alongside one another, the sign in the firmament is a star, and a cross, and a virgin holding a child, called "signum" (sign) by Isaiah.

### Translating the Plays into the Seventeenth Century

Material from the two Chantilly plays is rearranged and adapted in an early seventeenth-century manuscript in the convent archive: Liège, Archives de l'Etat, Fonds Dames Blanches de Huy, MS 386bis.<sup>20</sup> This manuscript was copied by two collaborating hands in a format similar to that of the Chantilly playbook, and contains a single play. In it, the plans for the Massacre of the Innocents and Herod's revenge on the

three kings are incorporated alongside the Nativity material, and the Purification episode is missing (although the script is unfinished, suggesting that its inclusion may have been planned). The existence of this later play-text, which carefully reworks, synthesizes, and augments Chantilly 1 and 2 with several new episodes, suggests either renewed or ongoing interest in religious drama in the convent at Huy.<sup>21</sup> The seventeenth-century version updates the language of the medieval material on which it is based, particularly its spelling and grammar (reflecting the passage of around 150 years), although the lexis remains largely unchanged.

In the seventeenth-century version of the Huy play, the significance of the phrase "hoc signum" is developed yet further. Before Jaspar calls the star the sign of a king, Melchior has personified Christ as a star: "de iacob lestoille aistreroit"<sup>22</sup> (the star of Jacob would be fixed in the sky); his words draw on the Old Testament prophecy in Numbers 24:17. The nuns also incorporate non-Scriptural reference into this version of the play, bringing in an unusual episode in which Herod consults a Sibyl; this perhaps draws on the *Legenda aurea*, in which on the day of Christ's birth, "Cum... Sibilla solo in camera imperatoris oraculis insisteret, in die media circulus aureus apparuit circa solem et in medio circuli virgo pulcherrima, puerum gestans in gremio" (When the Sibyl was alone in the room undertaking the Emperor's prophecy, in the middle of the day a gold circle appeared around the sun, and in the middle of the circle a beautiful virgin, holding a boy on her breast).<sup>23</sup> It is perhaps important that the Sibyl scene is an innovation of MS 386bis, the authors of which do not choose to incorporate the earlier Purification scene from Chantilly 2 into their revised version of the play. Their Sibyl sees and interprets the celestial sign that, in Chantilly 2, Simeon saw literally embodied in Mary and Jesus: this moment with the Sibyl is arguably a kind of oblique translation of that Simeon material into the new play—Simeon's embodied experience,

<sup>19</sup> Baker, *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and e Museo 160*, lines 539–40.

<sup>20</sup> Citations from this text are from Robinson's unpublished transcription and are noted by manuscript folio number. The manuscript is described, its hands discussed, and its play partially transcribed in Thomas-Bourgeois's "Le Drame religieux au pays de Liège avec documents inédits."

<sup>21</sup> In this regard, it is worth noting that the signature of one Huy sister who is known to have died in 1612, Eliys de Potiers, appears on the Chantilly manuscript: clearly she, at least, was still consulting it in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century.

<sup>22</sup> MS 386bis, fol. 4r.

<sup>23</sup> Jacobus da Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, cap. VI, p. 44. There are also precedents for the Sibyl's appearance within the tradition of liturgical and church music drama, where she is found in the *Ordo Prophetarum* among Old and New Testament figures predicting Christ's birth. See Ogden, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church*, pp. 37, 133–35, 218–19n37.

his literal seeing of Christ in the Virgin's arms in Chantilly 2 resurfaces here, reshaped as prophecy. This reverses chronology between the two scripts—while in intradiegetic terms Simeon “will see” the prophecy, in extra-diegetic terms, for the sisters who are actually undertaking this translation/adaptation, he has “already” seen it—in the medieval Chantilly 2 play, and more fully in the liturgical performance of the *Nunc Dimittis* that the Chantilly play perhaps accompanied, and certainly glossed. The movement of the iconic image of Virgin and child between medieval and post-medieval play, between Simeon (echoing Isaiah) and the Sibyl, demonstrates how translation, within these plays, merges differing diegetic and liturgical time-frames, confounding teleological narrative structures and weaving together past and present experiences by echoing and reworking important images and expressions.

The Sibyl tells Herod he must worship the child in the sign in the sky, who is greater than he:

Regarde ce merueillea signe  
au firmament qui se monstre:  
visiblement, cet vierge tenant  
entre ce main le benoit fruit  
de son ventre, ie vous dit  
veritablement qu'il serat in-  
comparablement Seigneur de  
vous eternelement.<sup>24</sup>

(Look at this marvellous sign  
Which shows itself in the firmament  
Visibly, this virgin holding  
In her hands the blessed fruit  
Of her womb, I tell you  
Truly that he will be  
Incomparably Lord over  
You eternally.)

During this episode, the nuns' script refers repeatedly to Herod as “Empereur,” which may well also reflect the influence of the *Legenda aurea*: within the *Legenda* the Sibyl speaks not to Herod but to the Emperor Octavian.

At the heart of the nuns' translation of the Nativity is a theological drive to explore the rich significations of the *signum* that first appears in the sky at the moment of Christ's birth. Generally, the nuns translate into the vernacular, but occasionally, as here, their translation instead preserves the Latin of a liturgical allusion, spoken by the kings, and provides a commentary on it using Old Testament prophecy, echoes

of later New Testament narrative, and exegetical narrative tradition—perhaps here that of the *Legenda aurea*.

Naturally, the Sibyl's words are unacceptable to Herod and precipitate his order to slaughter the Innocents. But the nuns do not allow their audience, or perhaps the actors in the play, to take sides against Herod as they might be expected to do in the face of such a threat of slaughter. Rather, Herod appeals to the audience, and in reply “Un [parle] pour tout le peuple” (One [speaks] for all the people):

O, Herode, redoutez roy,  
iamais autre roy ne prendront  
ne a luy n'obeirons  
et de tout vous reconfortez,  
car nous vous tiendront loiaute  
et iamais en nostre terre  
autre roy que vous n'aurons,  
et si une autre roy vouloit regner  
nous le ferons mourir sans  
demourer.<sup>25</sup>

(O Herod, redoubted king  
Never will we take another king  
Nor obey him  
And comfort yourself for all this  
For we will be loyal to you  
And never in our country  
Another king but you will we have.  
And if another king should wish to reign  
We will have him killed  
Without delay.)

This moment, which is shared with Chantilly 1, reveals both a theatrical interest in controlling audience reaction and a liturgical awareness of direct “audience” involvement, as well as of liturgy's potential to allow one to speak for all. These words of course recall those of the crowd at Jesus's trial, who declare: “We have no king but Caesar,” and thus condemn Jesus to death, foreshadowing the Crucifixion within the play's Nativity narrative.

The Prologue of Chantilly 1 is developed in the later MS 386bis in an “anoncemant” (announcement, introduction) that marks the convent context of their translation project in its first lines. The “anoncemant” addresses the Prioress, “Reverande Dame Prieure” (Reverend Lady Prioress), and specifically female audience, “chere Dames” (dear ladies): the manuscripts do not specify who speaks the “anoncemant,” but it is most likely

24 MS 386bis, fol. 6v.

25 MS 386bis, fol. 5v.

to be either Joseph or Mary, as these are the characters apparently onstage in the play's opening scene. As "anoncement" can mean announcement or Annunciation, a parallel is suggested between the "anoncement" asking the audience to accept the play, and Mary's acceptance of the Angel's announcement that she will bear Christ; an even more explicit parallel is created by the prologue's request that the prioress and sisters accept the play, and Mary's request immediately following that the "Good people" offer lodgings:

Cy comance le jeux  
De la Nativite de nostre Seigneur  
Anoncement d'iciluy Jeux:  
Reverande Dame Prieure,  
et vous mes chere Dames,  
sachez que nous avons des siens  
de vous represanter  
[l]e tres adorable nativite  
Du Roy nouveaux nay,  
Quy vous donera de la recreations  
et ansamble de la devotion.  
[...]ent ie vous supplie  
[...]aire l'honneur de l'agreer  
[...]ous donner audiance  
[...]vec un petit de silance  
[...]t vous voire comancer  
*Joseph et Marie vont logis cherchans*  
Hé bon ians loge nous ceans!  
Ie vous prie nous loger  
cet nuit seulement.

**Marie** Bonne Dame, au non de Dieu  
loge nous icy, nous ne scavons que  
d'en enquerir!

**Joseph a Marie** Noble Dame cet soy sy  
ie voy biens que on ne nous veuss  
loger nulement —  
ie voy iscy un viel estable:  
loger il nous faudra dedans.<sup>26</sup>

(Here begins the play  
Of the Nativity of Our Lord.  
Announcement of the play:  
Reverend Lady Prioress,  
And you, dear ladies  
Know that we mean  
To present to you  
The very worshipful Nativity

Of the new-born King  
Which will bring you recreation  
Together with devotion  
Now, I beg you  
To do [us] the honour of accepting it  
And to give us audience  
With a little silence,  
And you will see [it] begin.  
*Joseph and Mary go seeking lodgings:*  
Hey, good people, we are looking for lodgings.  
I beg you to lodge us  
Just for tonight.

**Mary:** Good lady, in the name of God  
Let us lie here this evening:  
All we can do is ask.

**Joseph:** Noble lady, tonight  
I can see well  
That no-one wishes to lodge us.  
Here is an old stable,  
We will have to take refuge  
inside it.)

That the "good people" and, later, the "good lady" who are petitioned are the audience (and then, probably, specifically the Prioress) is suggested by the fact that they are given no lines; furthermore, the "anoncement" has just asked, as the medieval Prologue did, that the audience be silent, so it is inevitable that they will not reply to requests for lodgings, and this must be assumed to be part of the play's operation: the audience must first be made guilty of failing to accommodate Mary and by implication to recognize Christ, in order that they may participate in the joyful acts of recognition by shepherds and kings that will follow. At this point, no direct translation of the Vulgate has occurred; rather, the nuns have extrapolated a dialogue from the Scriptural comment that "there was no room for them in the inn," and deployed the early theatrical convention of imploring the audience's acceptance for a play in parallel to that dialogue to create a devotional affect. The people, the audience who will join those who call for Christ's crucifixion, first fail to offer hospitality to the pregnant Mary.

In this seventeenth-century adaptation of the Chantilly play, the nuns retain the female shepherd characters, but develop their roles to create another female-voiced prophecy that looks towards that of the Sibyl. Alison, on encountering the living Virgin and child as opposed to their celestial signs, foretells Christ's future suffering and connects it also to his willing acceptance of the suffering of the poor:

26 MS 386bis, fol. 1v.

**Alison:** Amour luy fait prandre  
 humanite pour le forfait de nostre  
 iniquite natur, et souffrance  
 prandra contantemant pour la  
 deliurance de nostre grief tourmant.  
 Pour un palais riche et sortable  
 tu a choisit un pauvre estable,  
 le froit de l'iver, l'obscur nuict,  
 la pauvreté que chacun fait.<sup>27</sup>

(Love makes him take on  
 Humanity, for the misdeeds of our  
 Iniquitous nature, and he will happily  
 take on  
 Suffering to deliver us from  
 Our serious torment.  
 Instead of a rich and fitting palace,  
 You chose a poor stable  
 The cold of winter, the darkness of night  
 The poverty which each person  
 experiences.)

Alison speaks from within the temporal frame of the shepherds, explaining that Christ has already taken on humanity, but using the future tense to indicate that he will suffer, so has not yet. At the same time, the prophecy of Christ's Passion depends on knowledge beyond the normal human experience of time, and the interpretation of that Passion as delivering human beings from torment depends on a developed Christology that long post-dates the visit of the shepherds to the infant Christ. Alison does then give the Nativity a time and place—a poor stable, a cold winter's night—but her concern in doing so is not to create a theatrical sense of setting, but rather to note the allegorical significance of the divine choice of setting, and finally to load the moment with tropological meaning. The poor stable that Christ chooses is an image of the “poverty of each person”: these lines teach theology and inspire devotional response while evading any possibility that the Scriptural narrative should be understood as temporally or geographically—or indeed

spiritually—remote. The poor stable is entirely translated, carried into the time and place of the audience, and imagistically translated, to represent the heart of the believer that must welcome Christ.

These plays indicate the desire of the Carmelite sisters at Huy over a long period of time to educate and inform, to teach about the theology of Scripture and the devotional practice of the liturgy using the powers of theatre that can create memory and inspire affect. In this sense, their theatrical work might be situated alongside a wide range of intellectual, cultural and creative practices undertaken by medieval (and indeed later) nuns in various orders and geographical locations, which have recently become the focus of renewed study.<sup>28</sup> Our project seeks to understand better the complex workings of these and other convent plays through performance, and our research performances, featuring all-female casts, will take place 2017–2020 in contemporary convents as well as in other, secular, spaces. On a recent research visit to the Discalced Carmelites in Vilvoorde we learnt that dramatic activity continues to be of great significance to the sisters: it is central to the formation of nuns today, who are encouraged to engage imaginatively with the characters whom they create as playwrights or present as actors. Play rehearsals are frequently the chosen activity of the Carmelites' compulsory daily recreation hours, and plays are often presented as part of community celebrations such as a sister's jubilee. The nuns at Vilvoorde keep a collection of scripts written by sisters within living memory; they have an impressive costume collection, and showed us photographs of productions within the community that included, for example, nuns playing male roles in beards. It is impossible to prove the continuity of dramatic practice from the fifteenth century until today, but it is clear that the dramaturgy by which the fifteenth-century play sought to translate Scripture and liturgy for audience affect was developed more fully in the seventeenth-century adaptation of the Huy play, and may also have been “translated”—“carried over”—to the practice of today's Carmelite sisters.

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the publications of the *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe* research group: Blanton, O'Mara, and Stoop, *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue*; *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue*; and *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Antwerp Dialogue*. Also Burton and Stöber, *Women in the Medieval Monastic World*; Yardley, *Performing Piety: Musical Culture in Medieval English Nunneries*; and Bell, *What Nuns Read*.

<sup>27</sup> MS 386bis, fol. 3v.

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