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THE WORSENER'S TALE

Robert Edeson

FREMANTLE PRESS

FOREWORD

I must first express my gratitude to the eminent historian A B C Darian, who has generously contributed a suitably repurposed Preface that modern readers will find invaluable for locating themselves within mediaeval language and story. Moreover, the new translation of Henry Oldrice's *Th Pylgrymes Wey*, accompanied by intriguing research annotations—in part, reproduced with permission in this volume's Prologue—is entirely the work of Dr Darian.

Without this historical resource, the extraordinary progress made by Richard Worse and his investigatory team in solving a series of attempted and actual murders in the deceptively tranquil village of Steeple Resting could hardly have been possible. More certainly, the repellent secrets of its ancient parish church would have remained undiscovered, perhaps for centuries more.

This Journal is intended to record for posterity those events, and to pay tribute to the ingenuity and courage of the men and women who not only brought long-overdue justice to victims of treachery, but in so doing restored honour to the great steeple of St Eke's, and hope and holiness to its famed bell-peal.

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PREFACE TO *AN ANNOTATED TH PYLGRYMES WEY*

I was delighted to learn that my annotated retelling of *Nyght of Stēpel Raest*, reprinted in this volume, was instrumental in the cause of justice—remarkably, both modern and mediaeval—as described in the pages that follow. Here, I offer also the Preface to that edition of the *Wey*, very slightly amended for the circumstances, in the hope that new readers might better appreciate the historical, and literary, antecedents to an intriguing contemporary drama.

Six-and-a-half centuries of audience slumber is more than any poet should endure before the waking-call of critical applause. Such has been the fate of Henry Oldrice, whose major work, *Th Pylgrymes Wey*, is only now receiving its deserved attention. In a case of belated fame falling strange[1], this has partly come about because of the *Wey*'s prophetic bearing on present-day events in the picturesque village of Steeple Resting, near Canterbury, England.

Of course, there has long been academic interest in the Oldrice manuscripts, but regrettably never of an excellence fit to appraise their author the equal of his near contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer. This injustice is rapidly reversing, and it is a matter of some personal satisfaction that in offering the following work to the public I might contribute, even slightly, to his cause.

The translation here is based on my reading of the *Wey* in all available versions, in which endeavour I was greatly assisted by Lawrence Enright's modern prose treatment of the

Treutheim manuscript, that being the most complete extant. Indeed, I owe much to Lord Enright's erudition, the more so for an auxiliary compilation glossary of rare words, some uniquely Oldricean, made available online.

I am also most appreciative of discussions with Magdalena Letterby, who contributed so much to my understanding of early Church doctrine, delinquency, and discipline. Others deserving special thanks are Edvard Tøssentern for his freely shared encyclopaedic knowledge of linguistics, and Lady Isobel Beckoner for her poetic commentaries, as well as a most hospitable accommodation during my research stay in London.

I thank the Master and Fellows of Nazarene, Cambridge, for private access to the College library's Mediaeval Collection.

In the past year I have been the honoured recipient of a Regents' Fellowship in the School of English at Mount Sycamore, affording many hours of stimulating discussion with outstanding faculty and international scholars, both established and student. For this I am most grateful.

Lastly, as ever, the greatest thank you goes to my incomparable editor at UITA Press, Alison Pilcrow.

Where MS-Treutheim extracts are given, as below, I have modified the original slightly (for example, by judicious repunctuation, and standard substitutions for the obsolete letters[2] **þ**, **ð**, and **ȝ**) in order to improve intelligibility for a reader not schooled in Middle English. In doing this, every effort was made to preserve both the wit and music of Oldrice's poetry.

For those unfamiliar with the *Wey*, two further matters for comment are briefly addressed: that of mood, and the dating of MS-Treutheim. We begin, by way of example, with the introduction of the Abbess of Ruine (*Prologue* l.65):

> From Normandie she wer and greatly fonned
> Of Englis Hims she livd foure yeare in Lond.

The reader (or listener) in Oldrice's time, by virtue of public taste and inconstancy of the vernacular, would be excused for not noticing a word play, but the intention is immediately made clear:

> As well confessen to th ostel throng
> Affections for our worshippe songe.

If the case for scandal were still not apparent, this follows:

> Faire was she, betroth'ed trewe to God, but alswo thanne
> Bi-twenen Holy Prayers givd wyfliche offeryng to Mann
> So by orologe of Canon Houre her feyth an chasthede stayt
> Were efer perfyt suited this or thate.

In its time, this was sensational composition, and could be expected to draw the ecclesiastical charge of *Insultemente*[3], if not civil and royal censure. The important point to note is that a satirical intent is clear throughout the *Wey*, progressively sharpened as each pilgrim, with one exception, is introduced. That exception is the last, number 37, who rode, ever watchful to his best, as the party's rearguard:

> Ther was a pious book'ed man secrete in every thing
> Sum calld him Knyght an prēst an Worsener to Kyng
> He wered blak cope an rod arere eure waccheful to his beste
> An sayed nought til dethe nyght of Stēpel Raest.

The unexpected shift in mood from irreverence to solemnity, and quickly to darkness, is one of the most startling in literature. (The abruption is made more evident in poetic voice by a metrical jarring in the last line.) Yet, it makes sense, partly because of an irreproachability attaching to the office of Worsener, but also given the tragedy shortly to befall their

company on the eve of entering Canterbury. (We might, too, suppose an atonement benefit for Oldrice were he ever in need of divine forgiveness for all the *grete mockrie* that had gone before[4].)

Regarding chronology, there are two questions to answer. Mention of a Bischop Angren of Bruges within the pilgrim group dates the events in or before 1370, the year of his death recorded at Dover. Next, the lore attaching to the Kneeling Knight bloodstain in Canterbury Cathedral can be traced to 1369 precisely. In support of this, Wallis Pioniv in a Lindenblüten lecture entitled 'Henry Oldrice and His *Wey* with Numbers', suggests that the contested line

> Threttе-seuen soule waeren tho of egal yeir

(*Prologue* l.17: 'Thirty-seven souls were they of equal years') encodes the year of interest, being 37^2 or 1369. (There are other instances of Oldrice being sly with numbers.)

Whilst 1369 seems widely accepted, at least provisionally, as the year of pilgrimage, the date of writing is less certain. No one has suggested this might predate the events depicted (such a concept, now commonplace, was limited to practices like divination), which leaves us with 1369 or later. What can be confidently asserted, though, on copyist style and linguistic grounds, is that *Th Pylgrymes Wey* was in the hands of scribes many years before the appearance of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The obvious inferences to be made regarding historical priority and originality—and appropriations, possibly—I shall leave to literary jurors more robust in argument than my peaceable disposition allows.

At this point it is customary for an author, having acknowledged indebtedness to the expertise of others, to conclude with a saintly *mea culpa* regarding possible textual errors yet to be

discovered. This gesture is invariably disingenuous and would certainly be false in the current circumstance. Notwithstanding the sentiments of gratitude expressed above, I wish to make clear that authorities cited, presumed to have contributed their best, own full responsibility for any and every perceived shortcoming of scholarship in the work.

A B C Darian
Madregalo

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[1] An aphorism due to Oldrice! (Laite fame fallès straungeli: *Me Meneth* IV l.222; transmitted through Elizabethan 'Late fame falleth strange', in several sources.)

[2] To be read *thorn*, *eth*, and *yogh* respectively.

[3] Peculiarly, lay-blasphemy, corresponding in gravity to secular *Sedicioun*.

[4] Decades later, Chaucer attempted the same with his 'Retractions'.

PROLOGUE

NYGHT OF STĒPEL RAEST

Being the conclusion of *Th Pylgrymes Wey* by Henry Oldrice,
tragically shortened by an unforeseen event.
NEAR CANTERBURY 1369

Of all the stopping places serving pilgrims who journey from London to Canterbury, Stēpel Raest has no equal in prettiness and comfort.

The spire of St Eke's[1], when seen from miles before, lifts the spirit of any traveller, for the village reputation is of good fare and warm bedding. Of course those things—the steeple and fine rest—gave this place its name.

This spire is a progress marker too, reminding the saddle-sore that next morning they dismount in Canterbury. That also lifts the spirit, for by now some would gladly exchange an hour's riding horse for a day's hard kneeling. But these are people genuine[2] in faith, and many aver, on first sight of that spire, to feel within them the nearness of Saints, who are here Thomas Becket and Augustine of Canterbury. There is certainly much holiness about Stēpel Raest.

Even the horses from that point become more eager in their step[3], perhaps aware they will soon be lightened of a human burden, just as those they carry will be also lightened of a human burden, which is the heaviness of conscience. For such riddance, done publicly, is the purpose of pilgrimage. By this reasoning, about riddance, we can say that horses too are pilgrims going to Canterbury.

The land of Kent is deceiving, though its people are not—you know the thieves and brigands on the *Wey* are descended from the North, or crossed from Normandy with the chill wind. I mean that when the steeple is first seen, as was described, there remain hours of travel, and many times the spire seems smaller after larger. That is strange advancement through a land, from one to another vision trick, but in the nature of those parts.

At last, the company reached Stēpel Raest, to great welcome, as if no similar column of confessants had ever been encountered. The church bell rang, village dignitaries came out, and many a hostelry servant, instructed to solicit custom, shouted out the glories of his place. But the pilgrims' constable of the day, whom you know was the college Praeceptor, chose their inn. It was called the Canterbury Bell, with beds enough for all. So to The Bell they went, led by messenger Hobble, that institution's winning advocate, first to queue before the ostler, look about the premises, then settle into lodging rooms.

At three hours after noon, the company were gathered up by the Praeceptor and led to St Eke's. There was held a service conducted by the vicar, giving thanks for their safe arrival. When this was over, the pilgrims wandered separately or in small groups, exploring the churchyard, the village green, and the variety of taverns and alehouses.

I should tell you about this churchyard, which is very beautiful, if we say that of a site of graves. The grass slopes down to a river, called the Anas here, and over that is a stone arch bridge, with fine yews all about. The headstone inscriptions are the saddest in England, even if that might be claimed of others, because to die a pilgrim is the most miserable destiny. There is one naming Simon Acolytēs, of whom you will be told.

I said there is a holiness about Stēpel Raest. From a distance, when the spire beckons forward and back as I described, those of fragile faith may think this truth illusory. But I assure you, once here, in the graveyard, looking up, you feel the certainty of God in the steeple of St Eke's.

They next assembled at six o'clock, to be seated in the great refectory at The Bell. There, supper was served, and it was the best in their journey, along with wine and ale and merriment. So the reputation of Stēpel Raest was not diminished. After some time the Weaver, who had been elected host of ceremonies—or truly stated, festivities—for their final night, ascertained that all had finished eating and were ready for a course of entertainment.

Now, about the Weaver, you know that he was cut from cynic cloth, and clever in his art[4]. He judged a garment's worth by the weight of human failing it concealed, and by that measure priced his fabric into silver. But more than master of the loom was he an artisan of homily, professing expertise in the business of a soul's repair, at least exteriorly. So he prospered selling sanctity to sinners; by which I mean a thin cloak's thickness of the semblance of it. Anyway he, this clever Weaver, stood up, gestured for quiet, and spoke to the others.

'You vagabond lot, you sorry scoundrels, feasting and carousing now, when in the morning you will hide your moral pocks beneath a shriving robe, and on still-drunken knees beg favour from a Saint. Alas, what companions have I had these days? What impureness have I supped with?'

He held forward his arms as in a benediction, but where now a priest would gaze to the ineffable and intone some mystery of his calling, the Weaver feigned to study closely his hands, one then the other, saying dramatically, 'And ... these stains. These tincture marks of Satan. I am corrupted by impenitence about me that is not my own. In truth I tell you: it is the contagion sin of his society, and that only, for which this sober child of God will seek tomorrow's pardon at the Shrine.'

The vagabond lot were silent, not knowing whether to be amused or chastised. But none then picked up a cup of wine. The Weaver continued.

'But I have observed one amongst us who is no wretch like all of you, but man of faultless spirit; who along our way has protected us from brigands by his presence and from God's

wrath by his prayer. You know I speak of the solitary man, who wastes no word.'

The host now looked at the Worsener. 'Sir Knight, these fallen souls beseech, share with us your humour of whatever kind, for we approach night's ending, and our thirty-seventh Tale is rightly also ranked Knight's ending. We are, Sir, your obedient and grateful audience.'

With that, the Weaver resumed his seat. After some seconds the Worsener, who had been looking down throughout, rose at his place. He thanked the host for his words, but begged earnestly to differ in the judgement of others, saying he was honoured to be in the company of good people on a noble and Christian enterprise. He hesitated, as if weighing his words, and looked around the room. Then he added something unexpected.

'Good people but one, I say: the one whose design is not our holy end. For there is a wretched spy and felon in our midst. Of whom I speak I cannot tell, but know this: before you reach confession time his hand will smite us foul. Tonight I pledge his wickedness will be punished, whether in its hour of committing or on his Satan line a hundred generations forward. May the Lord have mercy on all who suffer harm, and may the Lord bless the good amongst you.'

He led the room in a short prayer to St Thomas Becket, asking for safety in the night and on the next day's ride to Canterbury. Then he began the thirty-seventh entertainment. It was not to be mirthful or ribald like its predecessors, and you will understand that those who listened were quickly sobered in their chairs.

First, he raised his arms, as had the Weaver, but more properly, as a priest would. But, also like the Weaver, he looked first at one hand, then the other.

'About the staining of hands, Master Weaver, have no fear; for God knows the origin of all things. Now on that subject, I can tell you of a well-regarded maiden, once in Saracen lands, who did in divination plunge two natural hands together into

one same broth they named Augury Water. This was done in full view of her audience.'

He imitated the act in the air before him.

'And out might come one hand red and one blue, being left and right; or right and left; or two red; or two blue. But also front and back, being palm and knuckle sides, of either hand might differ so as well[5].'

He held up his hands again, turning them over for study.

'And by these signs she told the future of the curious, for both colour sort and men's destinies are numbered sixteen[6], and she was knowledgeable in their meaning. She was called the Maiden of Fates.

'But that is a tale inside a Tale. Let us start where it is sensible to do so.'

37. Here Beginneth The Worsener's Tale

From Venice, there was a philosopher-priest called Christianus del Oscini, and I describe events around one hundred years before tonight. But let us start where it is sensible to do so[7].

As an infant, he was named Lorenzo, and was silent for his first five years. But when he did begin to say words his family was much astonished, because he proved gifted in any language spoken before him. Also, his memory for every fact and experience was unequalled.

For this promise of peculiar genius he was given schooling under patronage of the Doge. That was in holy matters, in languages, and all the sciences. At twelve he won a *Sapienza* debate against a great rhetorician of his city; the event was in public and adjudicated by those listening.

At age sixteen he was found to speak the language of the birds, and this attracted great respect, for all would wish to know their thoughts. It was said that he was most happy when in discourse with the swints, which are the holiest of birds[8], and likewise in his presence their song would become the sweetest ever heard.