

VA, SORYTE, DEU TE MAUDYE! (EGERTON 613): ON LIVING WITH MICE IN MEDIEVAL BRITAIN

NOTES AND QUERIES

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Perhaps the most famous rumination on humankind's co-existence with mice, largely thanks to Steinbeck, is Robert Burns' 'To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest With the Plough, November, 1785', in which the poet laments his inadvertent destruction of a rodent's home and recognizes its right to live. While one might imagine that in the Middle Ages the hardships of daily life would inspire a less charitable response to the depredations inflicted by *mus musculus*, a cheerfully light-hearted perspective on the potentially fraught relationship between mice and men is offered by a little-known Anglo-Norman poem in which the speaker offsets his frustration at the rodent's nibbling of his clothing and grain by acknowledging, albeit ironically, a certain respect and affection for the creature.¹ While the poem may not quite rival Burns in terms of poetic genius or pathos, it is of socio-cultural interest for the insights that it offers into medieval attitudes towards a ubiquitous irritant in daily life, and of literary interest not only as one of the relatively few comic lyrics in Anglo-Norman, but also, to the best of my knowledge, as the only medieval encomium—even if ironic—addressed to a mouse.

Va, soryte, Deu te maudye! survives as a unicum in the trilingual miscellany London, British Library, MS Egerton 613, f. 30v.² It stands before a copy of Guillaume Le Clerc's *Bestiaire divin* (f. 31r–58v),³ but as tempting as it may be to read *Va, soryte!* as handily adding to the bestiary one of the species absent from its repertory, the link is probably coincidental. Preceded on f. 30r by a unique copy of a prose *Quinze signes du jugement dernier* which ends with eight blank lines below,⁴ our poem, written in a markedly different hand from the ten others identifiable in the manuscript,⁵ gives every impression of being an impromptu attempt to fill a blank page.

In the only previous edition of our poem, Thomas Wright claimed: 'The writing is in some places almost erased, and in others so ill written that it is not easy to decypher.'⁶ This seems an unduly harsh characterization. The page is in good condition, and the writing is well preserved and eminently legible. The copyist produces an Anglicana script dating from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. The most distinctive trait is the extent of flourishing: the descenders of **y**, **m**, and **w** slant diagonally to the left, with a thick hook ascending diagonally to the right; the descender of **r** is long, with a whipped loop joining to the next letter; final **s** is round, with a thick descender extending well below the line; **d** has a thick ascender rising diagonally to the left, which is whipped back down and across to form the bowl; the ascenders of **b**, **h**, **k**, **l** are whipped extravagantly to the right, and occasionally forked to the left. We also note a two-compartment **a** and a peculiar two-part **g** featuring a disconnected circle and bow beneath. Abbreviation is sparse and conventional.

The poem is presented without any heading and occupies nineteen lines on the page; at the base of the page, in a lighter ink, a different hand has written the Arabic numerals 1 to 10, with two further characters beneath. In most cases a mid-line punctus separates these long lines into two verses; exceptionally, v. 33 and 36 each occupy a full line in the MS, while the metre suggests that the mid-line punctus in the fifth MS line, after *de karlet* (v. 10), should have preceded it. The first two lines in the MS are each followed by a blank line, which Dean interprets as suggesting 'that staves for music were intended' (122), although no annotation is provided. The second and third lines in the MS begin with paraphs, followed by minuscule characters. Some, but by no means all, of the other MS lines begin with a majuscule. Wavy lines are drawn at the end of some MS lines in order to connect them (e.g. v. 4–6, 8–10, 26–8, 33–6), but not to signal a full stanza. The refrain is not written in full until the end of the fourth stanza (v. 24), having to that point been represented only by the first two or three words, followed by a wavy line (v. 6) or *et cetera* abbreviation (v. 12, 18). This treatment of the refrain might suggest that the poem was better known than its isolated transmis-

sion would suggest, or, perhaps, that the copyist, deeming the available space insufficient, assumed that delayed provision would suffice for the sufficiently perceptive reader.

The underlying versification indicates that the poem consists of six stanzas of six lines, all sharing the same refrain; the same penultimate line also appears in the second, fourth, and fifth stanzas (v. 11, 23, 29), while the phrase *bone vye* is placed at the rhyme of the first and final stanzas (v. 5, 35). The verses would appear to be organized *abcbdd*, but could only be considered rhymes throughout if one assumes effacement of final consonants in a number of admixtures: *s* in *lyon: baruns* (v. 2, 4) and *meysun: puruns* (v. 14, 16), *t* and *p* in *chat: drap* (v. 8, 10), and *r* in *gerner: blé* (v. 20, 22); otherwise these would constitute assonances. Following Continental French conventions in counting syllables, and assuming underlying elision when the scribe writes a monosyllabic word in full before a word beginning with a vowel (e.g. *de autre*, v. 10), we find eighteen lines of seven syllables and fifteen of eight; this alternation between seven and eight syllable lines is embodied by the refrain, whose syllable count varies between the two in accordance with whether *sorys* or *soryte* is used. Of the remaining lines, two contain nine syllables and one six syllables; these could easily be emended to comply with the apparent seven/eight alternation, but the brevity of the poem, its limited transmission, and other uncertainties counsel against intervention.

The limited linguistic evidence points, unsurprisingly, to an Anglo-Norman author, probably of the late thirteenth century. Amongst the rhymes, the aforementioned potential effacement of final *s*, *t*, *p*, and *r* is a recognized Insular trait.⁷ The metre would seem to confirm aphesis in *mé puruns* (v. 16).⁸ The admixture *lyon: baruns* (v. 2, 4) could be seen as underlying morphological evidence for authorial inclusion of flexional *-s* for masculine nominative singular (*lyons*), but this argument is weakened if one accepts *meysun: puruns* (v. 14, 16) as a rhyme. While the spelling *le soryt*, *le sorys* (v. 8, 19, 25, 31) may seem to indicate that the noun is masculine as well as the usual feminine, there is no evidence that this is authorial: just as the definite article *le*, like the pronoun *le* (v. 32), could be scribal, the potentially masculine *malades* (v. 25) and *mort* (v. 31) are not confirmed by a rhyme, nor does the metre prove the absence of feminine *-e* on *hardy* (v. 7), *petit* (v. 19). The syncopated future stem of *fray* (v. 28, 34), common in Anglo-Norman, is confirmed by the metre if one assumes eight syllables to be regular;⁹ conversely, the full stem of *fer(r)ay* (v. 9, 26, 32) is required in order for the relevant lines to reach seven syllables.

The scribe's Anglo-Norman credentials are confirmed by numerous orthographical traits. These include: before a nasal consonant, frequency of *u* for *o* (*cum*, v. 2; *cuntes e baruns*, v. 4; *mun*, v. 20, 22 etc.) and *au* for *a* (*Kaunt*, v. 8, 20, 25, 31; *maungera*, v. 15; *maunder*, v. 27); consistent use of *ey* for Continental *oi* (*reys*, v. 3; *treys*, v. 33; *esteyt*, v. 35, etc.), with levelling indicated by *meysun* (v. 14) and *aver* (v. 9); presence of final dental on third-person singular *at* (v. 11, 23, 29), and conversely its absence from *er* (v. 25, 31); adventitious *h* in *hoveke* (v. 3), *how* [AQ2] (v. 10, 33); and syntactical confusion in the [AQ3] use of oblique direct *la* for dative *li* (v. 21). [AQ4]

Va, soryte, Deu te maudye!

De la soryte ne di ge mye

Ke elle n'e[st]¹⁰ hardy cum lyon;

Ele meyne hoveke reys,

4 Pres de cuntes e baruns.

Tusjurs meyne¹¹ bone vye:

Va, soryte, [Deu te maudye!] 

Mut fut hardy le soryt

8 Kaunt ele se cumbati a chat.

Je la ferray¹² aver robe

D'ekarlet how de autre drap,

Kar ele me at en sa baylye:

12 Va, sorys, Deu [te maudye!]

De la soryte ne ay je qure
Ke ele veyne a ma meysun.
Ele maungera mé heses

16 E tut le quyr de mé puruns,¹³
Kar autre chose ne ay je mye:
Va, sorys, [Deu te maudye!]

Mut fut petit¹⁴ le sorys

20 Kaunt ele entra e[n] mun gerner;¹⁵
Deu la doynt la male vye,
Kant ele denea¹⁶ de mun blé!
Kar ele me at en sa baylye:
24 Va, soryte, Deu te maudye!

Kaunt le sorys er malades,
Je la ferray cunfesser.
Mayn la maundera le prettre,
28 Ci li fray ove ly parler,
Kar ele me at en sa baylye:
Va, sorys, Deu te maudye!

Kaunt le sorys er mort,

32 Je le feray enterer.
Quynse jours how treys simeynes
Pur li fray le seynner¹⁷ soner,¹⁸
Kar ele esteyt de bone vye.
36 Va, soryte, Deu te maudye!

1. The targets of this mouse's attention are as in Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hiberniae*, dist. I, cap. XXVII: 'Sed mures infinitissimi: qui et enormius quam alibi grana consumunt; et vestes, serratas etiam et clausas, demoliendo corrodunt' (*Giraldi Cambrensis opera*, eds. J. S. Brewer, J. F. Dimock and G. F. Warner, 8 vols (London, 1861–91), V, 61). On the moves taken against such actions, cf. P. T. Leeson, 'Vermin trials', *The Journal of Law & Economics* lvi (2013), 811–36. That mice did not, however, provoke unequivocal antipathy is demonstrated by G. Bianciotto, 'Des souris et des hommes', in H. Matsubara (ed.), *Les Animaux dans la littérature: Actes du Colloque de Tokyo de la Société Internationale Renardienne du 22 au 24 juillet 1996 à l'Université Keio* (Tokyo, 1997), 41–72, whose excellent survey of the depictions of mice in medieval French texts finds that while evidence such as invocation of saints to protect against rodents confirms the harm that they caused, literary treatments (e.g. fables, proverbs) tend to be more positive and sympathetic.

2. In the absence of any heading, we derive this title from the refrain, in preference to the *La Sorys* of R. J. Dean and M. B. M. Boulton, *Anglo-Norman Literature: a Guide to Texts and Manuscripts* (London, 1999) (henceforth ANL), 121–2, no. 215 (in the four-verse text sample provided, read *houke* as *hoveke* and *prees* as *pres*), which seems inspired by the *La Soryte* supplied by J. Vising, *Anglo-Norman Language and Literature* (London, 1923), 64, no. 271 (note erroneous record of ‘five’ stanzas); cf. A. Långfors, *Les Incipits des poèmes français antérieurs au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1917), 85. The manuscript is described in detail by B. Hill, ‘British Library MS Egerton 613-I’, *N&Q* ccxxiii (1978), 394–409; note also T. Hunt, ‘Insular Trilingual Compilations’, in R. Jansen-Sieben and H. v. Dijk (eds.), *Codices miscellaneorum: Brussels Van Hulthem Colloquium 1999* (Brussels, 1999), 51–70 (esp. 57–8, 69). It can be viewed online at: <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=egerton_ms_613>.

3. Cf. ANL, pp. 281–2, no. 702.

4. Cf. ANL, 353–4, no. 639.

5. Hill notes ten hands in total (395–6), but excludes the copyist responsible for the Middle English medical recipes on ff. 71r–74v. There are further minor annotations in different hands.

6. *Reliquiae Antiquae: Scraps from Ancient Manuscripts Illustrating Chiefly Early English Literature and the English Language*, ed. T. Wright and J.O. Halliwell, 2 vols (London, 1841–3), I, 107–8. That Wright’s problems of comprehension may have been linguistic rather than palaeographical may be indicated by the following errors in his edition: 1 inexplicable exclamation mark; 2 *ne*, marked with (sic); 3 *hoveka*; 8 *ne frat* (for *a chat*); 15 *me heyses*; 16 *E tuz, me purune*; 20 *e mun cervere*; 26 *confesser*; 27 *Mai*; 28 *oue*; 35 *esteit*.

7. Cf. I. Short, *Manual of Anglo-Norman*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2013) (henceforth MAN), § 22.1, 23.8, 24.2–4.

8. Cf. MAN, § 19.10, 30.1; see footnote to v. 16 below.

9. Cf. MAN, § 19.1, 19.6.

10. While *e* for *est* is found in Anglo-Norman (cf. MAN, § 23.2), it is corrected here for clarity.

11. The first *meyne* (v. 3) is from *maindre* ‘to dwell’, while this is from *mener* ‘to lead’.

12. Minor erasure after *ferray* – of *f*?

13. *The Anglo-Norman Dictionary* (<<http://www.anglo-norman.net/>>; henceforth AND), s. v. *hose* v. 15–16 to offer *heses* as an attestation of the sense ‘hose, leggings’. In this citation, Wright’s incomprehensible *me purune* (v. 16) becomes *me purine*, which the editors suggest reading as *furure*. MS *me puruns* is, however, quite legible, and should be added to AND as an aphetic form s.v. *esporon* ‘spur’, the leather straps of which are gnawed; and, as a result, it might make more sense to read *heses* likewise in the context of knightly apparel, and thus with the sense of leather greaves.

14. *hardy* scored through before *petit*.

15. Wright prints *cervere*, which is included in the list of headword variants in AND, s.v. *gerner* with the suggestion that it be read as *cernere*; as the MS in fact reads *gerner*, these phantom forms should be expunged.

16. Wright prints *denea*, cited in AND, s.v. *disner* as an attestation of *(se) disner de* ‘to eat, make a meal of’. This spelling of the verb is unusual, but not impossible; the MS could also be read as *devea*, but since the sense of this solution would be opaque, we follow Wright’s reading.

17. This is the only attestation provided for AND, s.v. *seymner* ‘bell-ringer’.

18. *soner* interlinear insertion.

AUTHOR QUERIES

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