

**Dialogue between a Lord and a Clerk upon Translation,  
from Trevisa's Translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*,  
included in Fifteenth Century Prose and Verse:  
An English Garner, introd. Alfred W. Pollard (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1903),  
203–8.**

*The LORD:* Sith the time that the great and high tower of Babylon was builded, men have spoken with divers tongues, in such wise that divers men be strange to other and understand not others' speech. Speech is not known but if it be learned; common learning of speech is by hearing, and so alway he that is deaf is alway dumb, for he may not hear speech for to learn. So men of far countries and lands that have divers speches, if neither of them have learned others' language, neither of them wot what other meaneth. Though they meet and have great need of information and of lore of talking and of speech, be the need never so great, neither of them understandeth other's speech no more than gagling of geese. For jangle that one never so fast, that other is never the wiser, though he shrew him instead of 'good-morrow'! This is a great mischief that followeth now mankind; but God of His mercy and grace hath ordained double remedy.

One is that some man learneth and knoweth many divers speches, and so between strange men, of the which neither understandeth other's speech, such a man may be mean and tell either what other will mean. That other remedy is that one language is learned, used, and known in many nations and lands. And so Latin is learned, known, and used, specially on this half Greece, in all the nations and lands of Europe. Therefore clerks, of their goodness and courtesy, make and write their books in Latin, for their writing and books should be understood in divers nations and lands. And so Ranulphus, monk of Chester (Ralph Higden), wrote in Latin his books of Chronicles, that describeth the world about in length and in breadth, and maketh mention and mind of doings and deeds of marvels and wonders, and reckoneth the years to his last days from the first making of heaven and of earth. And so therein is great and noble information and lore to them that can therein read and understand. Therefore I would have these books of Chronicles translated out of Latin into English, for the more men should them understand and have thereof cunning, information and lore.

*THE CLERK:* These books of Chronicles be written in Latin, and Latin is used and understood on this half Greece in all the nations and lands of Europe. And commonly English is not so wide understood, ne known; and the English translation should no man understand but English men alone; then how should the more men understand the Chronicles, though they were translated out of Latin, that is so wide used and known, into English, that is not used and known but of English men alone?

*THE LORD:* This question and doubt is easy to assail. For if these Chronicles were translated out of Latin into English, then by that so many the more men should understand them as understand English, and no Latin.

*THE CLERK:* Ye can speak, read, and understand Latin; then it needeth not to have such an English translation.

*THE LORD:* I deny this argument; for though I can speak, read, and understand Latin, there is much Latin in these books of Chronicles that I can not understand, neither thou, without studying, avisement, and looking of other books. Also, though it were not needful for me, it is needful for other men that understand no Latin.

*THE CLERK:* Men that understand no Latin may learn and understand.

*THE LORD:* Not all; for some may not for other manner business, some for age, some for default of wit, some for default of chattel, other of friends to find them to school, and some for other divers defaults and lets.

*THE CLERK:* It needeth not that all such know the Chronicles.

*THE LORD:* Speak not too straitly of thing that needeth; for straitly to speak of thing that needeth, only thing that is, and may not fail, needeth to be. And so it needeth that God be, for God is, and may not fail. And, so for to speak, no man needeth for to know the Chronicles, for it might and may be that no man them knoweth. Otherwise to speak of thing that needeth; somewhat needeth for to sustain or to have other things thereby, and so meat and drink needeth for keeping and sustenance of life. And, so for to speak, no man needeth for to know the Chronicles. But in the third manner to speak of thing that needeth, all that is profitable needeth, and, so for to speak, all men need to know the Chronicles.

*THE CLERK:* Then they that understand no Latin may ask and be informed and ytaught of them that understand Latin.

*THE LORD:* Thou speakest wonderly, for the lewd man wots not what he should ask, and namely of lore of deeds that come never in his mind; nor wots of whom commonly he should ask. Also, not all men that understand Latin have such books to inform lewd men; also some can not, and some may not, have while, and so it needeth to have an English translation.

*THE CLERK:* The Latin is both good and fair, therefore it needeth not to have an English translation.

*THE LORD:* The reason is worthy to be plunged in a pludde and laid in powder of lewdness and of shame. It might well be that thou makest only in mirth and in game.

*THE CLERK:* The reason must stand but it be assoiled.

*THE LORD:* A blear-eyed man, but he were all blind of wit, might see the solution of this reason; and though he were blind he might grope the solution, but if his feeling him failed. For if

this reason were aught worth, by such manner arguing men might prove that the three score and ten interpreters, and Aquila, Symachus [Symmachus], Theodocion [Theodosius], and Origenes were lewdly occupied when they translated holy writ out of Hebrew into Greek; and also that Saint Jerome was lewdly occupied when he translated holy writ out of Hebrew into Latin, for the Hebrew is both good and fair and y-written by inspiration of the Holy Ghost; and all these for their translations be highly praised of all Holy Church. Then the foresaid lewd reason is worthy to be powdered, laid a-water and y-soused. Also holy writ in Latin is both good and fair, and yet for to make a sermon of holy writ all in Latin to men that can English and no Latin, it were a lewd deed, for they be never the wiser for the Latin, but it be told them in English what it is to mean; and it may not be told in English what the Latin is to mean without translation out of Latin into English. Then it needeth to have an English translation, and for to keep it in mind that it be not forgotten, it is better that such a translation be made and written than said and not written. And so this foresaid lewd reason should move no man that hath any wit to leave the making of English translation.

*The CLERK:* A great deal of these books standeth much by holy writ, by holy doctors, and by philosophy; then these books should not be translated into English.

*The LORD:* It is wonder that thou makest so feeble arguments, and hast gone so long to school. Aristotle's books and other books also of logic and of philosophy were translated out of Greek into Latin. Also at praying of King Charles, John Scott translated Deny's books out of Greek into Latin, and then out of Latin into French; then what hath English trespassed that it might not be translated into English? Also King Alfred, that founded the University of Oxford, translated the best laws into English tongue, and a great deal of the Psalter out of Latin into English, and caused Wyrefrith, Bishop of Worcester, to translate Saint Gregory's books, the dialogues, out of Latin into Saxon.

Also Caedmon of Whitby was inspired of the Holy Ghost, and made wonder poesies in English nigh of all the stories of holy writ. Also the holy man Beda translated St. John's gospel out of Latin into English. Also thou wotest where the Apocalypse is written in the walls and roof of a chapel, both in Latin and in French. Also the gospel, and prophecy, and the right faith of holy church must be taught and preached to English men that can no Latin. Then the gospel, and prophecy, and the right faith of holy church must be told them in English, and that is not done but by English translation, for such English preaching is very translation, and such English preaching is good and needful; then English translation is good and needful.

*The CLERK:* If a translation were made that might be amended in any point, some men it would blame.

*The LORD:* If men blame that is not worthy to be blamed, then they be to blame. Clerks know well enough that no sinful man doth so well that it ne might do better, ne make so good a translation that he ne might be better. Therefore Origines made two translations, and Jerome translated thrice the Psalter. I desire not translation of these the best that might be, for that were an idle desire for any man that is now alive, but I would have a skilful translation, that might be known and understood.

*The CLERK:* Whether is you liefer have, a translation of these chronicles in rhyme or in prose?

*The LORD:* In prose, for commonly prose is more clear than rhyme, more easy and more plain to know and understand.

*The CLERK:* Then God grant us grace grathly to gin, wit and wisdom wisely to work, might and mind of right meaning to make translation trusty and true, pleasing to the Trinity, three persons and one God, in majesty, that ever was and ever shall be ... [ ... ]