

JEHAN DE VIGNAY AND HIS INFLUENCE ON EARLY ENGLISH LITERATURE

ALTHOUGH we find but a cursory mention of Jehan de Vignay in the works on old French literature by Petit de Julleville, Suchier and Birch-Hirschfeld, G. Gröber and Voretzsch,¹ he must have enjoyed somewhat of a reputation during the early part of the fourteenth century. That fact we can judge from the numerous extant manuscripts and incunabulum editions of his works. I have not been able to find any definite date for his birth or for his death. In fact what little I have been able to gather has been found mostly in his own works.

He was probably a Norman by birth, for we find from a paragraph inserted in one of his translations² that he went to school in Normandy at a little town called Molay-Bacon, which is a village not very far from Bayeux. In the same passage mentioning his school days, he tells of witnessing a miracle which occurred at a festival in honor of St. Louis. Moreover, he dedicates his *Livre des Eschez* to the Duke of Normandy, afterwards King John. In this dedication he acknowledges himself to be a monk under the jurisdiction of the duke "Jean."

I should think that he was born probably about 1275 A. D. which would make him old enough to write his first work, the Latin treatise entitled *Margarita philosophiarum*, which appeared in 1298. We also find that in 1298 he was probably an official in the monastery of Dijon.³ Twenty years later, that is in 1318, we have the record of the acquittal of a certain Jean de Vignay of hav-

¹ Cf. Petit de Julleville, *Littérature française*, Paris, 1896; vol. II, pp. 262, 270, 299, 313; Suchier und Birch-Hirschfeld, *Geschichte der Französischen Litteratur*, Leipzig und Wien, 1900; opp. p. 261; G. Gröber, *Grundriss der Romanischen Philologie*, II Band, I Abteilung, Strasburg, 1902; pp. 984, 990, 1012, 1015, 1020, 1023 f., 1027, 1030; Voretzsch, *Einführung in das Studium der Altfranzösischen Litteratur*, Halle, 1905; p. 498.

² Cf. chap. XLVIII of de Vignay's translation of Robert Primat's *Chronique*.

³ Cf. Hauréau, *Histoire Littéraire de la France*, Tome XXX, Paris, 1888, pp. 289 *sqq.*: Jean de Vignay, Grammmarien, Professeur à Dijon.

ing murdered one called Colinet de la Ville au Bos. In the Archives Nationales at Paris there is a chart⁴ containing a full account of this acquittal. Moreover, we find that he had been held in prison for some time on this charge of manslaughter. He was completely cleared from all suspicion in 1318, the Sunday before Ascension Day. Of course, I can not be certain whether this Jehan de Vignay is the same person as the translator, but the date of 1318 and the fact that most of his translations appeared from 1326 to 1341 would make it quite possible and very plausible. A mere conjecture on my part would be that this incident had something to do with his religious bent and probably caused him to limit his translations to prayer books and similar works.

Another thing that would make it seem reasonable to think he was born in the neighborhood of 1275 is the fact (as is also interpolated in one of his translations⁵) that his father had returned with St. Louis from his crusade to Egypt. He mentioned the fact that his father was accompanied by his uncle, Guillaumes du Pont. The date of this must have been 1254, the year that St. Louis was called back to France by the death of his mother, Blanche of Castile.

After his acquittal from the murder charge we next find that Jehan de Vignay is filling a monastic position in Rouen, when in 1326 he was selected by the Pope to make a translation of the Gospels for Queen Jeanne de Bourgogne, who had appealed to the Pope for a prayer book in French.⁶ This first work in translating gave him an introduction to the royal family and put him under its protection for probably the rest of his days. The last date given for his translation is 1341⁷ and it is very probable that he died soon thereafter. Dr. Jordan in his doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Halle in 1905, wherein he publishes the text of *Mirouer de l'Eglise*, gives the probable date of his death as 1348.

⁴I have had this chart copied in connection with my study of de Vignay. It seems to me valuable as a typical account of legal proceedings of the period.

⁵Cf. Primat's *Chronique*, chap. XLIIII.

⁶Cf. Berger, *La Bible française au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1884; p. 221, 5 me. partie: *Versions du XIV^e Siècle, Jean de Vignay*.

⁷Cf. L. Delisle, *Cab. des Mss.*, vol. III, p. 163, where is given the following description of a lost MS.: "1070. Alixandre en prose, traduité l'an 1341 par frère Jehan de Vignay."

However, I do not know what reason Dr. Jordan has in specifying this exact date, as he gives no authority therefor.

Another fact concerning his position may be added, and that is that, as he usually states in the introduction to his translations, he was "hospitalier" of the order of "Saint Jacques du Hault Pas" in Paris.

His popularity as a translator at the Valois court is attested by the fact that, as before mentioned, he made his first translation for Queen Jeanne, the wife of Philip VI who reigned from 1328 to 1350. Moreover, it was at her request that he translated the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent de Beauvais. This is doubtless his largest and most important work. This large work was beautifully illustrated in its translated form, one of the original copies of which we probably have in the Bibl. Nat. Fr. 316. His next translation was also done at her command and the fourth translation was dedicated to her husband Phillip VI. His translation of *Legenda Aurea* was also made at the queen's suggestion, while his translation of *Livre des Eschez* was dedicated to their son John, duke of Normandy.⁸ The fact that his translations were, for the most part, elaborately written with floriations and beautiful illustrations proves conclusively that his books were intended for the private libraries of the royal families. This is also attested by the fact that some of the old numbers on the fly leaves also contain the private marks of one or two later kings, to whom they were doubtless handed down. Again he usually acknowledges his appreciation of the royal patronage at the beginning or conclusion of his translations by his well wishes for the members of the "ligne des fleurs de lys."

Before going into further details concerning his French works, mention should be made of his earlier literary work. In 1298 appeared his Latin treatise entitled *Margarita philosophiarum*. This is a Latin treatise on the arts and sciences. It is to be found in three manuscripts. In these same manuscripts is another Latin work entitled *Glossa in Doctrinale d'Alexandri de Villedieu*, which, from internal evidence, should probably be attributed likewise to the

⁸ These facts concerning his royal patrons are to be found in the dedicatory introductions of the older manuscripts themselves.

authorship of Jehan de Vignay. This *Doctrinale* was a Latin grammatical treatise written in Latin verse. According to Sandy's *History of Classical Scholarship*, the author was a well-known thirteenth century scholar from Villedieu, a town in Normandy.⁹

His French translations are twelve in number. The earliest one, as before mentioned, was done at the command of Queen Jeanne and is entitled *Epistres et Evangiles de tout l'an*. It is extant in four manuscripts, and in the last chapter we find that it was finished May 13, 1326. It is important in that it was used in the church service of the early fourteenth century.

The date of his next work is 1333 and it is entitled *Mireoir Historial*. This is by far his largest and most important work and is extant in some forty-one manuscripts. One of these manuscripts, Bibl. Nat. Fr. 316, is dated 1333 and is probably one of the original manuscripts made for the royal family. It is most beautifully illustrated in brilliant colors and floriations. In this one manuscript alone there are 320 miniatures, the first of which shows Vincent de Beauvais being ordered by St. Louis to compose his *Speculum Historiale*, as well as the portrayal of Jehan de Vignay receiving the queen's command to do the translating. Another manuscript of this same part of the work has the signature "Jehan, Duc de Normandie et de Guienne." This would indicate that it should also be dated previous to 1350, when the duke of Normandy became king John. There are also 280 miniatures in this manuscript, the first of which being exactly the same as the one above described from the Paris manuscript. This second old manuscript is now found in the University library of Leiden.

As the title would indicate the *Mireoir Historial* is a general survey of the world's history from Creation to the reign of St. Louis, 1226-1270. The numerous fine illustrations would doubtless give the story of the work to the members of the royal family. The *Mireoir Historial* is a massive work containing in its manuscript form four folio volumes, with about 400 leaves each. To show what a wide scope this work covered, it should be mentioned that some 29 Æsopic fables are therein contained. The excuse for inserting these fables is that they illustrate the work of Æsop, a

⁹ Cf. Sandy, *op. cit.*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1906, pp. 554 *sqq.*

bare mention of whom is made under the section devoted to the history of Persia and the part describing Cyrus the Great, during whose reign Æsop was slain. These 29 fables, including some of Æsop's best known, such as the Lamb and Wolf, the Crow and Fox, the Lion and Mouse, etc., have been edited for the recently published memorial volume of studies dedicated to the late Prof. A. Marshall Elliott of Johns Hopkins University.

Jehan de Vignay's next translation, *Chronique de Primat*, evidently appeared soon after the *Miroir Historial*. This is apparent from the fact that the *Chronique*, composed by Robert Primat, a monk of St. Denis, is a continuation of the world's history, bringing the narrative from 1250 to 1285 A. D. This translation has been published by Paul Meyer in its entirety.¹⁰ It was of especial importance to queen Jeanne because it covered the history of the reign of her maternal grandfather, Louis IX.

The fourth work of Jehan de Vignay, according to its own introduction, was translated in 1333. This would put it immediately after the second work just described. The title of his fourth translation is *Directoire a Faire le Passage de Terre Sainte*. It was written in Latin a year previous to its translation by a traveler, "frere de l'ordre des prescheurs," whose name was Brocardus. It was probably not as popular as the preceding work, and is left to us in its manuscript form only. It was dedicated to the first Valois king.

In the following year, 1334, appeared Jehan de Vignay's second largest translation, namely, *Legende Doree*. This work was translated from the *Legenda Aurea*, an important work on the life and miracles of the saints, written by Jacobus a Voragine, a Dominican monk, who became archbishop of Genoa in 1293. As is the case with most of de Vignay's translations, this follows the Latin text more or less word for word. However, another translation was extant at the same period by a certain Jehan Belet. The latter work is not nearly so literal and has 49 less legends than are found in de Vignay's translation. This work was also done at the instance of Queen Jeanne, and its popularity is attested by the fact that there

¹⁰ P. Meyer, *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, Tome XXIII, Paris, 1876.

are at least 28 extant manuscripts containing the work as well as some 18 incunabulum editions. Its possible influence on early English literature will be noticed later.

The remaining seven translations bear no dates and we shall mention them briefly in order of probable importance. There are extant 46 manuscripts containing his French translation of *Le Livre des Eschez*, that is, there are more manuscripts for this work than for either the *Miroir Historial* or the *Legende Doree*. The two incunabulum editions of this most popular work are to be found in some five copies. The Latin original was written by Jacobus de Cessolis. Although, as the title indicates, it is a work on chess, there are incorporated also the "sayings of doctors, poets, philosophers and ancient sages made for the moral instructions" of the human race. Here we find that our author is not so literal in his translation, but paraphrases rather freely. In fact he added some stories and fables in his translation, as previously noted. This is dedicated to John I, while he was still duke of Normandy.

Another religious work translated by Jehan de Vignay is entitled *Mirouer de l'Eglise*, which was written by a certain cardinal Hugo. This work is not dated nor do we know exactly to which member of the royal family it was dedicated, although we find on the last page of one of the two manuscripts in which it is handed down to us, the words "most noble and powerful lord and sovereign king." Although he follows his Latin text so closely as to make mistakes from the point of view of idiomatic French, he does not translate the whole work, but inserts extraneous matter which is compatible with his own ideas on church functions. This translation has been published in the previously mentioned Halle dissertation by Dr. Jordan.

We have two manuscripts each for his translations of Palio-logue, *Enseignements* and Odorique de Frioul, *Merveilles de la Terre d'Outremer*. Both of these are without date, although we know the latter in its original was written in 1330 and that its author, Odorique, died in 1332.¹¹ Odorique himself witnessed the marvels of the land beyond the sea. The former instructions are for those who have to do with "wars and governments."¹²

¹¹ Cf. P. Meyer, *Arch. des Missions*, II Série, vol. III, p. 317 sqq.

¹² Cf. *Romania*, vol. XXV (1896), p. 409.

There is one manuscript containing his tenth translation which is entitled *Oisivetez des Emperieres*. The Latin was written by Gervais de Tilbury, sometimes mentioned also as Gervais of Canterbury.

The work entitled *Livre Royale*, though not now extant in manuscript form, is also attributed to our author by Berger in his work entitled "The French Bible in the Middle Ages."¹³

His twelfth and probably his last work is entitled *Roman d'Alixandre*. Although we have no manuscript containing this work, Leopold Delisle gives the following description of the manuscript that used to be in the Louvre—"Alixandre en prose, traduit l'an 1341 par frère Jehan de Vignay."¹⁴

As mentioned occasionally in describing his works, Jehan de Vignay, on the whole, followed his Latin original very, we may say, too closely, and, in fact, occasionally his translation was practically unintelligible. However, once in a while does he show his originality in the fact that he makes interpolations and additions to two or three of his works. However, he certainly was a most active translator and we are indebted to him for the few scraps of historical information not recorded elsewhere. Besides this merited importance, his real popularity was very great when we consider that he wrote for the members of the royal family and when we consider that there remains over one hundred copies of his manuscripts which were written with great care. The number of incunabulum editions of his work also attests the fact that some of his works at least continued in their popularity.

Although we can find no proof of his real influence on other literature, his work certainly influenced the English literature during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The importance of de Vignay's influence on English literature is emphasized by the fact that some ten editions of two of his works appeared in English in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a time when printing was in its infancy and books were very rare. There are now in European and American Libraries some forty copies of these early editions. The importance of these works is still emphasized when we consider that William Caxton, the first English printer, selected

¹³ Cf. Berger, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Cf. L. Delisle, *loc. cit.*

two of them for publication in English, viz., *Legende Doree* and *Livre des Eschez*. In fact Caxton acknowledges in his introduction to his first edition of the *Game and Playe of Chesse* that he preferred Jehan de Vignay to the original Latin. This edition of Caxton's *Game and Playe of Chesse*, perhaps the first printed English book, was dated 1475. Some of the copies of this edition are very valuable and one copy was sold in England about a generation ago for over \$500.

Caxton's *Golden Legend* first appeared in 1483 and the second edition in 1487. That this was a stupendous undertaking in those early days in the history of printing is evident when we notice that the work contained 449 folio pages. The copies of this first edition of Caxton's *Golden Legend* are also very valuable, although there are at present no copies which do not have a few pages missing. Blades, in his "Life and Typography of William Caxton," records the purchase of one of these copies by the Duc d'Aumale at the large sum of 230 pounds, *i. e.*, almost \$1150.

Wynkyn de Worde, Caxton's successor, brought out four more editions of the *Golden Legend* and in 1503 another edition was published by Julyan Notary. Likewise in the introduction to the *Golden Legend*, Caxton acknowledges the fact that he preferred de Vignay's translation to the original Latin, as well as to other French and English versions. The comparison of de Vignay's French with Caxton's English further verifies the indebtedness of Caxton to de Vignay's work.¹⁵

In conclusion we are forced to concede de Vignay's importance by his appreciable influence on English literature during its earliest days of printing.

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¹⁵ Cf. Blades, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 135 *sqq.*; vol. II, pp. 8-12; pp. 155 *sqq.* Blades gives in detail the history of the Caxton editions and copies, and also makes interesting comparisons between Caxton's English and de Vignay's French.