NOTES

NAMING THE UNNAMED ‘PHILOSOFRE’ IN CHAUCER’S PROLOGUE TO THE TREATISE ON THE ASTROLABE

Chaucer cites a maxim on friendship in his prologue to the Treatise on the Astrolabe to explain why he has given in to his son’s request to learn to use the astronomical instrument.

Than for as moche as a philosofre saith, ‘he wrappith him in his frend, that condescendith to the rightfull e praiers of his frend,’ therefore have I yeven the a suffisant Astrolabie as for oure orizonte, compowned after the latitude of Oxenforde. (lines 5–10)

The quoted philosopher and Chaucer’s source for this saying have hitherto remained unknown to modern scholarship on the prologue. I submit that Chaucer’s source for the quotation is a Latin medical treatise, the Practica brevis, attributed to Johannes Platearius (d. 1161?), who is said to have written from Salerno during an active period of medical translation and composition there. He offers this dictum as the very first line of his prologue to the Practica: ‘Amicum induit qui iustis amicorum precibus condescendit’ (‘He fashions himself a friend who acccedes to the righteous requests of his friends’). Chaucer translates the Latin verb induo literally with the Middle English wrappen (as ‘to put on’ or ‘to clothe itself’); as used by Platearius, induo might be better understood in its figurative sense of assuming a role. The Middle English Dictionary construes Chaucer’s use of wrappen in this instance to mean ‘to join oneself to’. The maxim, however, is the only attestation provided by the MED for this sense, which comes qualified with a question mark. On this reading, Chaucer is taken to have adapted a literal verb for dressing oneself to express a devoted investment in the fulfilment of friends’ wishes and desires. The discovery of his Latin source reveals this stroke of apparent lexical invention to be more likely the result of a poetic interpretation – perhaps even an overliteral misreading – rather than a unique and original exercise of lexical licence.

Though the Riverside text has the singular ‘frend’ where Platearius has the plural ‘amicorum’, two manuscripts of the Astrolabe also have the plural ‘frends’. These are Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 619 and Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.15.18. Bodley 619 is the text upon which John Reidy and Sigmund...
Eisner base their editions of the Astrolabe.\textsuperscript{6} According to Eisner, Bodley 619 preserves an excellent text of the treatise, as evidenced by the precision of its experimental figures;\textsuperscript{7} Simon Horobin has recently argued that the copyist of Bodley 619 worked from an exemplar of especially high quality.\textsuperscript{8} Both Reidy and Eisner emend Bodley 619’s reading of ‘frends’ to the singular ‘frend’ for their editions. Although its plural reading is not a much more difficult one, the editorial principle of \textit{lectio difficilior potior} might yet apply here; early scribes corrected the plural ‘frends’ to ‘frend’ for an easy parallelism with the prior ‘frend’ in the sentence. The reading of ‘frends’ in Bodley 619 may indeed be another instance of its exceptional faithfulness among Astrolabe manuscripts to the Chaucerian original. The excellent text of Bodley 619 more exactly translates the first line of the \textit{Practica brevis}, as does Trinity R.15.18; the other manuscripts of the prologue come extraordinarily close.\textsuperscript{9}

Could Chaucer have come across the \textit{Practica brevis} in his reading? Tony Hunt lists and describes the many British manuscript witnesses of the \textit{Practica} dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{10} This Latin treatise outlining treatments for various diseases appears to have been widely available in medieval England, often collected in manuscript alongside the work of Hippocrates, Galen, and other Salernitan medieval authorities. An Anglo-Norman translation of the \textit{Practica brevis} from the thirteenth century survives uniquely in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.1.20, though it lacks the prologue.\textsuperscript{11} A Middle English translation in a fifteenth-century manuscript, Cambridge University Library, MS Dd.10.44, includes the prologue, but leaves this first sentence untranslated in the original Latin.\textsuperscript{12} The evidence of its circulation in medieval England – in many manuscripts and in a number of languages – supports the supposition that Chaucer could have come across the \textit{Practica brevis} and its incipit on friendship, even with only an amateur’s interest in its medical matter. (A fifteenth-century manuscript of John of Arderne’s \textit{Liber receptorum medicinalium} borrows this maxim, too, as a response to a friend’s petition in its prologue.\textsuperscript{13}) ‘Philosofre’ is perhaps not the most intuitive appellation for a medical authority like Platearius, but it is not altogether inappropriate. Isidore of Seville thought medicine to be a ‘Second Philosophy’ as it too required a knowledge of all seven liberal arts. Medicine cured the whole body while philosophy cured the soul.\textsuperscript{14} In Middle English, ‘philosopher’ was a generic term for a learned or wise person, and could mean natural scientist more specifically.\textsuperscript{15} Middle English writers did occasionally refer to medical authorities as ‘philosophers’. For instance, a translation of Lanfranc of Milan’s \textit{Chirurgia} (c.1400) promises, ‘I wole sette medicyns in þis antidotarie þat I haue longe vsid, & I lernede hem of wise doctouris & of philosophoris.’\textsuperscript{16}

Yet Chaucer’s citation of ‘a philosofre’ has long misdirected scholarly investigation into this quotation away from natural sciences and towards Aristotle. Latin academic treatises in the Middle Ages called him simply ‘the Philosopher’ as
an honorific, and Chaucer's Parson twice refers to Aristotle as 'the philosofre' in the *Canterbury Tales* (X.536, 658). Seven manuscripts of the *Astrolabe* ascribe this maxim to 'the philosopher', with the definite article. But a searching review of Aristotle's writing on friendship has yet to find a corresponding passage therein (nor has a search of Cicero's, whose writing on friendship W. W. Skeat nevertheless thought to be the quoted source). Edgar Laird, in a recent discussion of this quotation and its possible sources, finds a resonant passage on the law of friendship and honest requests in a treatise on love by Peter of Blois, but admits that it is very unlikely to be the direct source for Chaucer's quotation.

But it is another Chaucerian sense of the word 'philosofre' that might explain its usage here. In the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, 'philosofre' is Chaucer's term for alchemists (VIII.862, 1122). At some point, writers or scribes of the alchemical sort of 'philosophical' texts appropriated Platearius' maxim on friendship for their introductions to alchemical material. 'Amicum induit qui iustis amicorum precibus condescendit' opens one copy of the *De secretis naturae*, an alchemical text attributed to Brother Elias the Minorite, and four copies of the *Tertia epistola super lapido phisico*, alternately attributed to Raymond ab Angelis and Raymond de Terminis. These texts are found in manuscripts scattered across the continent: Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, MSS 138 and 164; Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, MS 3751; Cambrai, Bibliothèque municipale, 919; and Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 923. Thorndike and Kibre's catalogue dates two of these manuscripts to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, two to the fifteenth, and one to the sixteenth. It is possible that Chaucer came across the maxim appended to a fourteenth-century copy of one of these texts, and knew the maxim as the opening to an alchemical text instead of, or in addition to, a medical one.

This alchemical explanation joins a number of others that could plausibly account for Chaucer's reluctance to name this 'philosofre'. Chaucer may have forgotten precisely where he came across this handy maxim on friendship. Or this could be a moment of characteristic coyness about sources (this being the same poet who invents Lollius as a source for his *Troilus and Criseyde*). Chaucer may have been aware of the line's duplicate appearances in the *Practica brevis* and in alchemical literature, and so opted for imprecision as a compromise. But this is all conjecture. The identification of the quotation's source does begin to elucidate how Chaucer's introduction borrows formulas of address native to, and trafficked across, a broader Latin scientific discourse that extends beyond texts on the astrolabe. The prologue, in quoting the maxim of 'a philosofre' circulating with medical and alchemical material, reveals the influence of the dedicatory rhetoric of adjacent genres of practical, scientific texts on the style of Chaucer's promise to teach 'lyte Lowys' the practical matter of the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*.

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NOTES

1 Quotations from Chaucer are taken from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, Mass., 1987).

2 The author identifies himself as ‘ego Platearius’ in the prologue in even the earliest manuscripts of the Practica brevis (for instance, in London, British Library, Sloane MS 2454, fol. 2r). However, any attribution to a Johannes Platearius is much more uncertain. Victoria Recio Muñoz rightly doubts the existence of a family of medical writers named Platearius in and around Salerno, a hypothesis first made by the nineteenth-century historian of medicine Salvatore de Renzi. See Muñoz, ‘La Practica de Plateario’, in Estudios de latin medieval hispánico, ed. J. Martínez Gázquez, O. De la Cruz Palma, and C. Ferrero Hernández (Florence, 2011), pp. 589–98. Pietro Capparoni cites an entry in the obituary of a Salerno cathedral confraternity noting the death of a Johannis de Platea in 1161; see ‘Magistri Salernitani nondum cogniti: A Contribution to the History of the Medical School of Salerno’ (London, 1923), p. 42. I ascribe the Practica brevis to Johannes here in accordance with current practice.


5 Middle English Dictionary, s.v. ‘wrappen’, v., 6 (c).


8 Simon Horobin, ‘The scribe of Bodleian Library MS Bodley 619 and the circulation of Chaucer’s Treatise on the Astrolabe’, Studies in the Age of Chaucer, 31 (2009), 109–24 (p. 118). Horobin contests a consensus that the copyist of Bodley 619 was an astronomical adept connected to Oxford; he proposes instead that the copyist was the prolific professional scribe Stephen Dodesham, working from a high-quality exemplar in his cloistered old age.


11 Ibid., I, 158f.

12 The translation is fols 1–100, opening: ‘Amicum induit qui iustis amicorum precibus condescendit j plateary for loue of my dyre frendys in þis tretyes …’

13 Cambridge University Library, MS Dd.5.53, fol. 10r: ‘Quoniam ut ait platearius in primo breve practica. Amicum induit qui precibus amicorum condescendit. Et quod dulcissime et carissime amice rogastis …’ Whether this prologue was influenced by Chaucer’s is difficult to judge. The ‘quoniam ut’ formula of quotation translates Chaucer’s ‘as much as’ nicely; however this prologue names author and work, while friends’ petitions here need not be ‘iustis’ or ‘rightfulle’.

14 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, 4.13.5. ‘Hinc est quod Medicina secunda Philosophia dicitur. Utraque enim disciplina totum hominem sibi vindicat. Nam sicut per illam anima, ita per hanc corpus curatur.’

15 *MED*, s.v. ‘philosphre’, n., 1 (a).


18 Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. W. W. Skeat (Oxford 1894), III, 352. He cites a particular line of Cicero’s *De amicitia*: ‘Haec igitur prima lex amicitia sanctatur, ut … amicorum causa honesta faciamus’ (‘Therefore let this be ordained as the first law of friendship, that … we do for friends what is rightful’). Quoted and translated in Edgar Laird, ‘Chaucer and friends: the audience for the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Chaucer Review, 41/4 (2007), 439–44 (p. 439 n. 5).


21 See Thorndike and Kibre, *Catalogue of Incipits*, col. 91. Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria MS 138 attributes the *De secretis naturae* to Brother Elias. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barb. lat. 273 attributes the *Tertia epistola* to Raymond ab Angelis, though this witness does not begin ‘Amicum induit …’; Cambrai, BM, MS 919 attributes the same to Raymond of Terminis.