

Chapter 8. Conclusion

As a topic for research, 'Properties' is not new or unexplored, but perceptions of it change during our own times just as they evidently did during the Middle Ages. The earlier literature on 'Properties' is an invaluable resource in that so much groundwork has been done as a basis for fresh research into the compiler, the manuscripts, the translations, and the place these occupied in late-medieval English life and letters. Twentieth-century research into the context in which the work appeared, and the excavation of related documents, has brought the compiler more clearly into focus. As a result, this long-lived work, that held value for many different readerships, can indeed help the historian in tracing long continuities in thinking about the world in which we live.

Research into the genre of the thirteenth-century *compilatio* as a tool of the militant Catholic church, and as part of a wider exchange of knowledge between east and west, has improved our understanding of the genre's context and function. The important studies of the English translation, the later-medieval ownership of manuscripts and the literary borrowings from Bartholomew, help to contextualise the work within a widening English readership of the later Middle Ages. However, in the present century important ongoing research is being shared and published in languages other than English. The size and scope of the work has so far prevented the appearance of a detailed reception history, but the present study contributes to such a project by examining, in English, the work's transmission and diffusion in this small but significant area of its medieval and early-modern readership.

In structure, content and purpose, 'Properties' can reasonably be considered as a parallel to the graphic compilations we tend to call *mappaemundi* today. The compilation deserves consideration as a specimen of a particular medieval genre based on a longstanding tradition of *imago mundi* texts that was both verbal and graphic, but essentially didactic in function. The 'world book' might take the form of a written tract or a drawn map, or both, but its function was to teach the world's biblical history, its coming end and God's judgement, and the way for the spiritual pilgrim to reach God. Bartholomew's image of the world, far from being a static account of the properties of things, is potentially dynamic and interactive in its appeal to the reader. It contains descriptions of people and things in action and at rest, in growth and decay, in transit and flux, inviting the reader's involvement through memory and identification of experience. Overall, Bartholomew makes strong contrasting statements about the coldness, instability and trouble of the physical world, set far from the sun, as in the preamble to Book 8; and about the joy and solace to be gained from things put into the world at Creation: light, stars, air, water, land, and the plants and

creatures that 'adorn' these elements. His work affirmed the orthodox accounts of Creation derived from *Genesis*, but also accommodated the Neoplatonic literary cosmologies blended into that orthodoxy by intellectuals of the twelfth century, such as Bernard Silvestris.

In setting out an accumulated body of conventional wisdom about matters to do with the material world, Bartholomew was using an up-to-date empirical approach, like earlier writers on nature such as Bernard Silvestris and the Aristotelian translators, and later ones such as Albert the Great.¹ But he was also working in the tradition of monastic instruction, exegesis and consolation for an audience versed in allegorical didactic literature, for whom all nature is 'a book of tropes cleverly arranged by the Creator to teach both logic and morality'.² From a small sampling of the work, this study indicates that 'Properties' holds rich reserves of evidence about the ways clerics were taught in the Middle Ages; about the imagery and rhetoric of the Franciscan Order as it was establishing itself throughout Europe; about the models of ideal communal life and social hierarchy that entered the stream of English didactic literature. It also has literary qualities that could relate to the author's need for diplomacy in teaching Franciscan students about their calling. This was a time when the church was alert against heterodoxy; when perceived papal favour towards the mendicants caused some ill-feeling from outside the Order; and when there was growing division within the Order over the definition of poverty. The medieval *compilatio* implies a long-established pastoral metaphor of gathering, as bees gather honey or gleaners gather corn. The way Bartholomew builds upon these familiar analogies leads one to conclude that his readers could engage imaginatively in familiar parables of earthly labour. Fragments from an implied larger narrative — in particular, those of the worker and the traveller, and of the ranks of the *familia* at their occupations indoors and out — invited meditation upon other stories drawn from memory and from the Christian Scriptures. The narrative element in his work suggests that readers, whether clerics or laymen and women, could ruminate upon the fundamental Christian themes of repentance and salvation as they dipped into the work in a spirit of contemplation. In a context of familiarity with the parable of the workers in the vineyard, the ox and oxherd, the bee, the vine, and the good servant all serve as models for material and spiritual labour, reward, fertility and fruition, and thus their recurring presence in the work can be seen as logical and necessary for its didactic purpose. Although this underlying logic in the work is not immediately apparent to us today, we can work towards it with the help of marginal glosses, perpetuated by copyists, reflecting a response by readers relatively close to Bartholomew in time and culture. These readers may not have been those for whom he originally prepared the work and who remain unknowable by us, but the thirteenth-century marginal glosses confirm that later practising preachers could find in 'Properties' a handy guide to help them in their professional work.

We may anticipate that the closer study of the glosses proposed in the forthcoming Latin/French edition will reveal more clearly the ways in which the text was interpretable by clerical readers, and the value of 'Properties' to the church in the context of its preaching crusade.³

By the time the Order of Friars Minor was integrated into English society 'Properties' was one of the books long held in the libraries of monasteries, the centres of expertise in salvation, and in the college libraries of Oxford and Cambridge, the centres of learning. It was valuable to scholars in that Bartholomew refers to a range of medieval authorities, including those relevant to practical curricula (such as Aristotle, Galen, Constantinus and Richard Rufus), as well as the Fathers of the church. Comprehensive sources, moral utility and practical applications helped to give the work wide appeal. The presence of 'Properties' in the Trevisa canon of translations made for Lord Thomas Berkeley IV indicates strongly that, in the political and economic upheavals of the late Middle Ages, 'Properties' could be regarded as a component of chivalric literature. However, it was also a source for preachers and a resource for 'pragmatic' readers and re-writers needing factual information. We have seen that the latter drew from it elements they needed to support their own position, to criticise and call to order, and to record knowledge of the material world. The conveniently defined format, flexible array of sources and verbal directness of Bartholomew's text lent itself to such uses and adaptations. Readers could have confidence in what it contained, but could adapt it to make new, authority-based texts that accorded with their needs, tastes and mental horizons. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Bartholomew was a source which helped people to know 'to which authorities one should give credence', as a reader of BL Ms Arundel 123 notes in the margin close to a mention of St Jerome.⁴ But the truths readers could find in 'Properties' were also flexible and complex. They could find scriptural truths — concerning the parable of the vineyard, for example — or the moral significance of the bestiary elephant. They could also perceive truth as in a mirror, reflecting a contemporary ideal: for example, in the normative descriptions of lordship or marriage in Book 6; of the idyll of summer in Book 9; or of the feats of Alexander in Book 15. A third, multivalent or ambiguous kind of truth could emerge from Bartholomew's impartial combinations of source material — as in the case of the bee, the stag, the cock or the lion. As we have seen, readers and writers could exploit the resulting ambiguities within the text to create portraits of living people in the context of the immediate here-and-now, highlighting qualities they wished to advertise or criticise. In the case of heralds and satirical writers, their understanding of the multiple sources feeding into medieval accounts of the created world enabled them to draw on the symbolic as well as observable properties of things, or to build double entendre into the portraits they created.

'Properties' can be a starting point in the historian's attempt to understand, from a historical perspective, what late-medieval people were expressing in their coded responses to immediate events. It was one repository of conventional but multi-stranded knowledge that fed into the exchanges of later-medieval society, particularly in the imagery of the natural world used by writers and artists. To be able to participate as non-contemporary observers in this serious play of allusion and counter-allusion, we need access to the layers of potential meaning available to the players. Our own awareness of the multiple constructions of things and properties available to readers can help us to understand something of the work's function as a source of religious authority, but also of a range of interpretative possibilities for later-medieval readers and writers. It is not possible — or necessary — to claim that readers or writers knew the work directly; but by doing so ourselves we might understand better what was being conveyed in those exchanges.

In the fifteenth century, the making of copies of Trevisa's *Properties*, and of other texts wholly or partially derived from the Latin 'Properties', coincides with evidence for the acceptance of English as a useable and worthy language for prose works. By this time, the compiler himself had gained a reputation as a repository of religious authorities, and as the prime authority on the properties of things. We find the compiler invoked as 'master' of received knowledge about the properties of the created world at a time when much new knowledge was becoming available from classical sources and from direct observation. By this time, the concept of 'property' had broadened to take in commercial and professional senses, but Bartholomew's representation of the divine cosmos, the world and society still supported the beliefs of later-medieval and early-modern Christians. The discoveries of Columbus, Cabot and Amerigo Vespucci in the 1490s posed a great intellectual challenge to the *imago mundi* that described and portrayed a Mediterranean-centred Christendom, based on the people, events and places of sacred history. The printed editions of *Properties* reveal that this image of the world was still meaningful during the period of maritime expansion, and tell us something about the gradual process by which people adjusted their mental horizons to new descriptions of the world's places and peoples.

In spite of its size and bulk, the labour of production and the expense of materials, and possible commercial risk, the translation and the printing of 'Properties' and *Properties* were evidently seen as worthwhile undertakings by those involved. There are many gaps in our knowledge of the dynamics of both the translation project and the later ventures into print, but it does appear that each one was brought about by a team of people making different contributions according to their position and abilities. The historian gains some access to the kind of corporate commercial activity that could centre on a marketable text, at a time when the physical and intellectual expansion of the sixteenth century again presented challenges to accepted images of the world already documented

and approved. As the traditional conception of the cosmos was challenged, and Trevisa's 'orisoun' was literally traversed by explorers, 'Properties' could be re-interpreted to support with its underlying authority new models of society and concepts of nature in the late-medieval and early-modern period.

By 1582, 'Properties' had survived changes in readership and conditions of production over three and a half centuries. Scholarly fashions had swung between Aristotelian and Neoplatonic explanations of the universe. Bartholomew's supposed Englishness, combined with his authority as a source of wisdom, would account for the way certain English men of letters promoted the myth of his English birth and respectable status while others saw commercial opportunities in the informative content of the work. We have no firm evidence that Bartholomew had any reason to favour England but passages in 'Properties' and *Properties* could be interpreted as privileging English interests, extolling the character of the English people, and endorsing an acceptable version of English history. In sixteenth-century England, a specific and literal interpretation of *Britannia* and *Anglia* as a fertile land with a genial and vigorous populace was congruent with the nationalism of the time, amid controversy about the English church and its doctrine, social tension over religion, war, famine and royal succession. A thriving print-culture enabled Stephen Batman to bring up to date the cosmology and geography already in 'Properties', since other descriptions (including those of contemporary travellers and magi) were available that he could plunder and incorporate into the work. The greater focus in 'Properties' on scriptural history and eschatology fitted the apocalyptic vision of Batman's own day and his concerns as a preacher. In the later years of the reign of Elizabeth I, Batman claims authorship and possession of the wealth of knowledge in his updated version of 'Properties', but also gives the mantle of wisdom to his patron and the profit of knowledge to his country. His edition can be understood best not as a re-issuing or updating of 'an olde auncient booke', but as an original contribution to learned debate about the world and about religion that was then being conducted widely with the aid of the printing press. Underlying Batman's commitment to his own country's immediate interests, to his education and political awareness, there is a strong strand of continuity with the past that can be found in his assumption that the created world of place and time was governed by divine providence and will, that people were living in its last age, and would be judged by God. His image of the world differs from that of Bartholomew in culturally specific details, but not in that basic assumption. In a culture where the wisdom of Solomon represented worldly power, patronage of 'Properties' endowed political sanction combined with moral *gravitas*. Its value as a repository of wisdom and knowledge that had both authority and practical usefulness, and sanctioned by its long association with the church and with preaching, enabled 'Properties' to survive the controversies generated by Lollard texts and Protestant reforms. Right up to the time of the gentleman scientists and scholars of the

nineteenth century, such as Joseph Banks and Robert Steele, 'Properties' remained the supposed property of the English nation and a symbol of national achievement.

NOTES

¹ Klingender, pp.350–9.

² Greetham, 1980, p.671.

³ See Chapter 1, n.18.

⁴ BL Ms Arundel 123, f.21v.