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**WALKING HOME FROM THE FISH-
POND: LOCAL ALLUSION IN WALTER
OF BIBBESWORTH'S 13 C. TREATISE
FOR HOUSEWIVES**

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In 1995 and in these pages Neil R. Aldridge summarised the history of a large moated enclosure at the Trinitarian priory of Motynden at Headcorn in Kent.¹ Evidence for fish-ponds was found among traces of moat and field systems, and a rabbit warren. Naturally the specific features of a fish-pond, whether man-made or natural, leave relatively little in the archaeological record. As recently as 1988 Brian K. Roberts could write of the “rediscovery of fishponds”.² Yet additional information on early fish farming may be available from an unexpected source with Kentish affinities. First, some general considerations.

The early medieval literatures of Britain, in English, Anglo-Norman French, Welsh, and Latin, make frequent references to the necessities of life, prime among which food, but always in passing. Something as common as fishing or brewing seldom rises to the level of narrative motif or an element of theme. Figurative use of household essentials such as food and clothing is often made in Christian homiletic works, but this offers little insight into process. Utilitarian writings, such as account books, do provide a basic vocabulary for many techniques but these are often paratactic entries, unconnected among themselves.

Nonetheless, such documentation often offers the first recorded instance of large blocks of medieval technical vocabulary. But well before the first household manuals in vernacular languages of the late fourteenth century, British literature does offer a little utilized source for the vocabulary in French and English of several domestic activities.

In the late thirteenth century the Essex knight Walter of Bibbesworth composed a *Tretiz* or treatise under the patronage of Dionisie de Munchensi, the mistress of Swanscombe in Kent and of vast estates in western Britain and Ireland.³ Editor William Rothwell states that the work “was written in order to provide anglophone landowners in late thirteenth-century with French vocabulary appertaining to the management of their estates in a society where French and Latin, but not yet English, were the accepted languages of record.”⁴ The

fictional addressee of the tract is, however, not the male landowner but rather the mistress of the house, *mesuer* in Anglo-Norman French, *housewif* as glossed in Middle English. The assumption of the work is that she will be prepared to pass along accurate French vocabulary to her offspring.⁵ Walter passes in review such specialized vocabularies as the terminology for the human body, clothing, collective terms for various domesticated and wild animals and their vocalizations, fields and their crops. He then addresses fishing and fish ponds. His objective is not so much an explanation of techniques as a simple communication of pertinent vocabulary. In one of the best preserved of the many manuscripts, the columns of rough-and-ready French verse have interlinear English glosses in red ink.

In this essay, the vocabulary of fish farming in the French text and English glosses is the object of a detailed examination. This and similar passages may be considered lightly narrativised catalogues. One of the rules of this popular medieval sub-genre was that no term be mentioned more than once or twice. Context and the better known terms then assist us in addressing those more difficult from our often imperfect knowledge of medieval technology. Given Walter's objectives, terminology rather than technique will have to be our chief concern, although the bilingual nature of the treatise will permit some degree of cross-illumination of the two cultural traditions. The possibility of lexical and/or technical borrowing will be explored, and the origins of the two fairly discrete fish pond vocabularies, Anglo-Norman French and Middle English, will be examined. Here, it should be noted that etymology is no sure guide to later meaning. Similarly, new technologies may generate or introduce appropriate new terminology, especially in the event of a technical transfer between cultures. Conversely, an established technical term may persist, even when its original referent has been superseded by new techniques and artifacts, so that the old word wins a new

signification. What is the historical depth of medieval British fish farming as recoverable from simple lexical evidence?

In the following, the Anglo-Norman text is first given in full, with the interlinear English glosses moved to the right margin. Walter's key terms are examined for their meaning, history, and origin.⁶ The interface between French terms and English glosses will be addressed. This detailed examination will yield a full English translation of the passage, appended to this article. First, then, Walter's text, which begins with the subheading "Now the French for the fisher in fish ponds or pools."

Ore pur peschour en viver ou en estauncke le fraunceis:

Si saver voillez la manere

Cum pescher devez en vivere, fische

Vivere est proprement nomé

Ou ewe vif est trové;

E euwe de servour primes espuchez, 5 laden hout

Car du peissoun la ne faudrez,

E si vous faudrez a cel estauncke pole

Ou le eauwe est a descoraunt, alwei

Alez dount saunz delai abindinge

Ou espleiteromes tut dreit au lay 10 grete pol

Car c'est eauwe en butemay. muire

La coveint pescher de nace szyne

Ou petite rei ne trove grace. neth

Il I ad nace e crivere ausi, szine ridel

Commune fraunceis a chescuni.	15	
La nace est menuement overez,		smale
Mes plus large partuz assez		
Ad le crivere pur quei le di.		
Car autre difference n'ad ici.		
Mes returnoms a la matire	20	
Ki de pescher vous voille dire.		
Le gurget de nace revercez,		the bothem torn hep
L'ordure leins engettez;		fulthe
Crapaude e lezart ne esparniez,		tode hevete
Serpent e colure ausi tuez;	25	neddre snake
Gravele e cailloun eruez,		greet flint
E lymaçoun ausint destruez.		snayl
Si du pesschun I trovez,		
Par les vemberges le pernez.		gilles
Ci il seit mulewel de mer,	30	kelinge
Overer le devez e espander,		
Le no tantost en oustez,		
Bouwele e eschine ensi le frez.		
Si returnez ver mesoun		
Du gardin par cele crevessoun	35	gappe
Tant cum venés au vert terail		grene balke
Ou le pastour est ou le aumail,		
Puis par ceo bois en cel umbrail		szadewe

Passerez desouz le hourail.		wode hevese
Mes dount servent a tant des peres	40	
Ki sunt appelez passueres		stepinstones
Pur passer secke lé russeles		stremes
Ki sunt si clers e si beles.		
II I ad ourail par .h. escrit,		
Orail ausi saunz .h. est dist.	45	
Desouz le hourail se kevre laroun,		hevese lindes huides
E par le orail oil meint horn.		
Mes einz ki passez plus avaunt,		
De terail vous ere plus disaunt,		balke
Pur ceo qu'il ad plus de sens	50	
Dunt tel I ad il difference.		
II ad tenoun e terail,		
E tenailles ki n'est merveille.		
Li tenoun tent li cotuyer,		handel tilier
E par le terail passe meinte ber,	55	
Mes tenailles servent des carbuns		tonges colles
En yver quant au fu seoms,		
E au fevre servent de custume		smith
Quant du martel fert sur 1'enclume.		

Walter's title for this section refers to the French terminology needed by the fisherman (*peschour*) and appears to make a distinction between *viver* and *estauncke*. The former derives from Latin *vivarium* 'a place where living creatures are kept' and suggests both that the pool is artificially constructed, or at least adapted from its natural state, e.g., a stream with a weir, and that its stock of fish may have been introduced rather than being native.

Estauncke, later glossed *pole*, is a natural formation such as a pond or small lake, with no significant inlet or outlet (*estauncke*, var. *estanc*, Modern French *étang*, < *estanchier* 'to block off' [cf. English *staunch*] < Late Latin **stanticare*, ultimately < Latin *stare* 'to stand', and thus related to English *stagnant*). In the ensuing verses, however, Walter states that *vivere* is properly used of a site on a stream. This is likely a bit of a folk etymology, with the "liveliness", the quality of being *vif*, transferred from the fish to the water. Thus, Walter establishes a different distinction than we recognize between vivarium or fish pond and pool, one based on whether or not there is running water. A third term, *servour*, is now introduced. Other usage suggests that this is also a term for a reservoir or vivarium (< Latin *servare* 'to keep, retain'; cf. Eng. *reservoir*). The water, most likely after being dammed up with a weir, is to be scooped out of the reservoir to facilitate taking up the fish—or so Walter's text and its English gloss *laden hout* would seem to suggest.

If the fish farmer is unsuccessful at a site by a stream or, more likely, does not have this option, he should go to a body of water such as lake (French *lay* < Latin *lacus* 'reservoir'; English gloss, *grete pole*) or large pool that is fed with water draining from higher land or the heath. The author's phrase is *eauwe en butemay*; 'bog water' we might say. The latter part of the phrase is derived from Latin *bitumen* 'pitch' but has been extended from the 'tar' to the 'pit' where it is found. The Middle English gloss *muire* 'moor, heath' assists in this identification. On balance, we must judge Walter's text relatively uninformative as

concerns the actual creation of a vivarium, whether it be in a partially blocked stream or in a pool on the heath.

The treatise now turns to fishing methods. In lakes and large pools Walter recommends a seine (*nace* < Latin *nassa* ‘seine’, *szyne* in English) rather than a smaller net (*petite rei, neth*). Nets are also to be distinguished from the *crivere* (< Latin *criblum* < *cribrum* ‘sieve’; Modern French *crible*). This is glossed *ridel* in English and would designate a riddle or sieve, although Modern English would not use this terminology of a fishing basket or cage. If not a true net, the riddle may have been some kind of wickerwork construct that would trap the fish but permit the release of the water. Walter states that the seine is small-meshed (*menuement overez* ‘small-worked’), while the openings (*partuz*) in the “riddle” are larger. But they have the same function.

The author then passes to the actual handling of the seine when it is taken up. The “neck” (*gurget* < Late Latin *gurga* < Latin *gurgēs* ‘gulf, abyss’; English gloss, *bothem* ‘bottom’) of the seine, where the fish are trapped, is to be turned out and cleaned of debris, stones, and any toads, lizards, snails, or other vermin that has found its way into the net. Any fish in the net, a mulwel for instance (glossed *kelinge* in English), is to be lifted out by the gills (*vemberges*, English *gilles*), split and spread out.⁷ Fins, guts, and back-bone are to be removed. Walter’s account then takes a very curious and perhaps personal turn.

The addressee of the treatise, Walter’s patroness or a more general “reader”, is imagined as leaving the pool and its fish, and returning to the house from the garden (*gardin*), which we must imagine as rather large, by an otherwise unspecified “gap” (*crevessoun*), perhaps an opening in a hedge or fence surrounding the pond. The gap gives on to a green band of uncultivated land, *terail* in French, *balke* in English. Here will be found the herd and his flocks (*aumail* ‘domesticated animals’). Then the housewife continues either through the

woods or along their shadowy edge (French *hourail*, glossed *hevese* ‘eaves’ in Middle English). She comes to a stream with stepping-stones, called *passueres* in French (“passers”) and so can cross the beautiful, clear stream without getting her feet wet.

In trying to plot this walk back to the manor, we may propose two spatial models. The first is concentric, with the manor on the floor of a valley, a garden on one side, then pasture land surrounding the estate, with a further concentric ring of woods, and finally the distant heath. The other model would be based on altitude or height differentials. The high heath, then woods, meadows, stream, garden, and manor house. But neither of these seems a useful backdrop onto which to project the housewife’s itinerary, which begins in the garden, then proceeds to the gap, strip of green pasture, the edge of the woods, and on to the stream with its stepping stones.⁸ Of course, a linear trajectory need not be envisaged. This puzzle need not occupy us further but it does raise the question of just what, in terms of extent and content, was understood by *gardin* in the late thirteenth century.

One could speculate that this scene was addressed to his patroness and reflected the actual circumstances, however common, of one of her estates.⁹ Of Dionisie’s holdings, which included Pembroke in western Wales and Wexford in Ireland, the estate of Swanscombe in northern Kent seems a likely candidate, given that Walter himself was from Essex. Certainly the higher ground on three sides of the settlement could easily be imagined behind Walter’s description. We may choose to call this scene a semi-pastoral *locus amoenus* but what we should note is that it is the husbandry exercised on the farm land and woods that is highlighted. Its focus is domesticated nature, tilled and tended, rather than the mystic charm of the wilderness. Such glimpses are relatively rare in medieval literature and may go some way to alleviating our disappointment at not learning more about medieval fish farming.

After the stepping stones, Walter abruptly shifts and begins a little disquisition on

homophones, taking *hourail* ‘edge’ as point of departure. This discussion of changes rung on *horail* ‘edge’ and *terail* ‘strip of land’ occupies a further sixteen verses, and give snapshots of thieves lurking under eaves, the ploughman holding the cross-piece of the plough handles, tongs used to rearrange the coals in a fireplace in winter, and the smith’s tongs used to hold firm the piece being forged on the anvil. None of this terminology is of special interest and the shifting topics mean that we do not have the same concentration of technical terms that even the brief disquisition on fishing provides.

Compared to other sections of Walter’s *Tretiz*, in particular those dealing with dressing flax, spinning linen thread, baking bread, and brewing ale, the author’s treatment of fish ponds and fishing is less informative.¹⁰ While these other vocabularies are basically of Latin origin, there are also terms from Celtic and Germanic, pointing to processes and instruments inherited from the Gauls or introduced by the Franks. Some even suggest cultural loans from Scandinavia via the settlement of the Northmen in the future Normandy. In these sections, the glosses provide early attestations in Middle English of a technical vocabulary also open to external influences. But here, in the section on fish ponds, these dimensions are unrepresented, perhaps because operations were at a greater remove from the manor house and less visible to a member of the minor gentry. Instead, the author indulges his taste for disambiguating homophones and, as compensation, treats the reader to a vividly imagined walk back to the house from the fish pond or lake, perhaps one with pleasant memories for his patroness.

Appendix

Now the French for the fisher in fish ponds or pools

If you wish to know the way in which you should take up fish from a vivarium, *vivere* is the correct term where running water is found. First, then, draw off the water from the reservoir, for you will not be lacking in fish there. And if you don't succeed with a pool where there is running water, go, then, without delay to where we can directly access a lake or large pool, for this is water that will have gathered on the heath. There it is suitable to fish with a seine, since you won't do well with a fine-meshed net. There is the seine and also the fishing basket or cage, each with its standard French name. The seine is worked with small meshes but the [wickerwork?] cage has rather larger openings, which is why I mention it, for there is no other real difference [in function]. But let us get back to our subject, which is fishing that I want to tell you about. Turn out the neck of the seine and clean out any filth in it. Don't spare the toads and lizards. Kill, too, any adders or snakes; throw away pebbles or stones, and also destroy any snails. If you find any fish in the seine, take it by the gills. Whether it is a mulwiel from the sea [or another fish] you ought to split it and spread it out. First remove the fins, and do the same with the innards and backbone. Then you will go back toward the house from the garden by way of the opening until you come to the green strip of unploughed land, where the herd is with his flock. Then through the woods in the shade you will pass under the edges [of the overhanging trees]. But there you will be served by the stones that are called "passers" (stepping stones), in order to pass dry-shod across the streams that are so clear and fine. There is a word *ourail* written with an *h*-, but there is also an *orail* without *h*-. Under the *horail* (eave or forest edge) hides the thief and with his *orail* (hearing) many a person hears the horn. But before you go any farther, I wanted to tell you more about *terail*, because there is more than one meaning and there are differences among them. There is

tenoun and *terail*, and *tenailles*, which is hardly surprising. The ploughman holds the *tenon* (the cross-bar between the handles) and many a coffin passes into the *terail* (ground), but *tenailles* (tongs) serve to handle coals in winter when we sit before the fire, and they commonly serve the smith, when he strikes with the hammer on the anvil.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Neil R. Aldridge, "The Trinitarian Priory of Motynden at Headcorn," *Archaeologia Cantiana: Being Contributions to the History and Archaeology of Kent*, CXV (1995), 177-212.
- 2 Brian K. Roberts, "The Rediscovery of Fishponds", *Medieval Fish, Fisheries and Fishponds in England*, ed. Michael Aston, 2 vols, Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1988, 1, 9-16. See also R. B. Delderfield, "The Origins of Ancient Woodland and a Fish-pond in Pound Wood, Thundersley, Essex," *Essex Archaeology and History: Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, 17 (1996), 322-24, and Christopher K. Currie, "Southwick Priory Fishponds: Excavations 1987," *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society*, XLVI (1991), 53-72.
- 3 On her husband's feudal relations, see Huw W. Ridgeway, "William de Valence and his *familiares*, 1247-72", *Historical Research*, XLVIII (1992), 239-57. As a corrective to myths about Kentish land-holding conditions, see R. J. Smith, "The Swanscombe Legend and the Historiography of Kentish Gavelkind", *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman*, ed. Richard Utz and Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 85-103.
- 4 Walter of Bibbesworth, *Le Tretiz*, ed. William Rothwell (London: Anglo-Norman Texts Society, 1990), 1. This edition, however welcome, is without lexical notes or glossary. In all, sixteen manuscripts of Walter's work have been preserved. Earlier editions include Wright's in *Femina*, ed. W. Wright (London: Roxburghe Club, 1909), which reproduces the text from British Library, Arundel 220, ff. 299-305, and *Le Traité de Walter de Bibbesworth sur la langue française*, ed. A. Owen (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1929), which publishes Cambridge University Library MS Gg.1.1. The Owen edition, with its many shortcomings, is now superseded by Rothwell's edition of the same manuscript.
- 5 Walter names his patroness in his preface but, since Joan de Munchensi (her better known name) was a descendant of William the Marshall, and her husband, William de Valence, was French-born, there can be little doubt about the family's linguistic competence in French. The stated aim of providing good French vocabulary for their offspring may then be a literary fiction.
- 6 Walter's vocabulary in this section is rather less demanding than elsewhere in the *Tretiz* and most terms are readily identified. Principal lexicographical resources for addressing his Anglo-Norman and Middle English lexis are *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, comp. Adolf Tobler and Erhard Lommatzsch (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1925-2001); *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, ed. William Rothwell et al. (London : Modern Humanities Research Association, 1992), Anglo-Norman On-Line Hub, <<http://www.anglo-norman.net/>>; *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français*, comp. Kurt Baldinger et al. (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval; Tübingen: Niemeyer; Paris: Klincksieck, 1974-); *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, ed. Walther von Wartburg (Bonn, F. Klopp Verlag, 1928-); *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath et al. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001), <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu.proxy.library.cornell.edu/m/med/>>; *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), *OED Online* <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>, in the last-named work with special reference to the etymological notes attached to entries.
- 7 This is the only species named here by Walter. Other section of the *Tretiz* address the collective names for domestic and wild animals, and their vocalizations but fish are not among them. There is a brief reference to herring at vv. 316-17. Another section of the treatise, on animals generally, has the line "Li peschour en viver pesche" linked with the verse "Le prestre en le eglise preche" ("The

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fisherman fishes in a fish pond – The priest preaches in the church”, vv. 292-93). Here Walter mentions both net and hook (*rey/hesche, nette/hock*). *Vemberges* ‘gills’, with widely varying orthography, is elsewhere used only of the flashing used on roofs, e.g., to seal off a gable. A Dutch compound such as **windbrek*- ‘wind-break’ seems the most plausible origin (**windbrek* > *guimbreg* > *guimberge*) and Walter’s use must be figurative and possibly idiosyncratic.

8 The garden could be brought closer to the manor, if we amended Walter’s verses to read “Si returnez ver mesoun / Au gardin par cele crevessoun”.

9 Walter names his patroness in his introduction (3, P1-2) but does not specify her land holdings.

10 The author addresses these several topics in studies in progress; see, for example, William Sayers, “Brewing Ale in Walter of Bibbesworth’s 13 c. French Treatise for English Housewives,” *Studia Etymologica Cracoviensia* (forthcoming).