



Cambridge, CCC, MS 16, f.155v

## Thomas de Turberville's Crime and Punishment

Thomas de Turberville has the dubious distinction of being one of the earliest recorded cases of an English knight caught spying for the king's enemies and being executed for treason. What makes Turberville's trial all the more memorable is that the documentary evidence available to the court where he was tried must certainly have carried more weight than any of the purely oral testimony that was heard. At issue was a fatally self-incriminating letter that Turberville could not deny having written and which proved his treachery beyond a shadow of doubt. It took the form of a report, in Anglo-Norman French, addressed to his Parisian spy-master and listing his espionage activities at the court of Edward I in 1295. We can only conjecture on how this crucial letter came to be intercepted, but there is no need to speculate on its contents, since, contrary to expectation, its text actually survives today. I re-edit and translate it below.<sup>1</sup>

A few words, first, on its historical context.<sup>2</sup> In the course of the hostilities between England and France at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Edward I sent an expeditionary force to Gascony under the command of John of Brittany. One Thomas de Turberville, who had formerly served in the English royal household, was a prominent member of the company. In April 1295 during the siege of Rions, to the south of Bordeaux, Turberville was taken prisoner. We have no details on the circumstances

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth J. Dean & M.B.M. Boulton, *Anglo-Norman Literature: a Guide to Texts and Manuscripts*, ANTS (London, 1999), # 92.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Prestwich's entry 'Turberville, Sir Thomas de (d. 1295), soldier and traitor' in *ODNB* : <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref.odnb/38079> ; M. Prestwich, *Edward I* (Yale U.P., 1997), pp. 383-84, 556-67, and Prestwich's earlier *War, Politics, and Finance: The Reign of Edward I* (London, 1972).

of his capture, no information on his imprisonment or on how and by whom his eventual ransom was paid. We next pick up his trail some four or so months later when, in August 1295, he is back in England and moving in court circles. He had been fortunate enough, he explained, to escape from prison in France. The verdict of history, however, was to prove to be very different: his release, it transpired, had come at a cost, and the price Turberville had been willing to pay to secure it was nothing less than the betrayal of his country. The contemporary Hagnaby Chronicle explicitly states that it was Turberville's treachery that bought him his liberty: ... *promist al rei de France Engletere pur sa deliverance*.<sup>3</sup> Turberville's pieces of silver were to have been a hundred librates of land, but he did not live to enjoy them. Instead he was to suffer one of the Middle Age's most horrendous forms of judicial punishment, that of being hanged, drawn and quartered in a humiliating public ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

There were few contemporary chroniclers who could resist the temptation of finding room for Thomas de Turberville's dramatic fate in their accounts of Edward I's reign. The most complete and most authoritative version accessible today is that edited by Luard in his 1859 Rolls Series edition of Bartholomew Cotton's *Historia Anglicana* of c. 1298.<sup>5</sup> Luard's text is also reprinted in what is the *nec plus ultra* of modern Turberville studies, J.G. Edwards's 1948 essay 'The Treason of Thomas Turberville'.<sup>6</sup> Other Latin chronicles to find room for Turberville in their narratives include Walter of Guysborough's, those of Bury St Edmunds and its Peterborough version, Dunstable.<sup>7</sup>

The extent of the notoriety which Turberville's execution brought him can be gauged also by the survival of an anti-French popular song in Anglo-Norman devoted exclusively to his crime and punishment. It portrays him as actively involved in the plotting of the French invasion of England that turned out to be a woeful and humiliating failure: *de Engleter sunt failliz Ly Franceys e sunt honiz*.<sup>8</sup> Turberville also finds a place in Pierre de Langtoft's *Règne d'Edouard I<sup>er</sup>*, part of a more voluminous and much copied historiographic compilation.<sup>9</sup> A Latin epitaph was also composed in Turberville's honour in the Merton *Flores Historiarum*.<sup>10</sup> These three texts figure in our Appendix, where they are also translated.

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<sup>3</sup> BL MS Cotton Vespasian B XI, f. 38r-v; [The British Library MS Viewer \(bl.uk\)](#) This chronicle is unedited.

<sup>4</sup> J.G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages* (CUP, 1970), p. 227; Henry Summerson, 'Attitudes to Capital Punishment in England, 1200-1350' in *Thirteenth-Century England* 8 (2001) 123-33. Cf. Robert Bartlett, *The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory, and Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (Princeton U.P., 2004), pp. 45-46. For the similar hanging of William de Marisco in 1242 (our illustration), see Suzanne Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris ...* (Univ. of California Press, 1987), pp. 234-35.

<sup>5</sup> H.R. Luard ed. *Bartholomaei de Cotton ... Historia Anglicana* (London, 1859, repr. CUP, 2013), pp. 304-6, 437-38. [The British Library MS Viewer \(bl.uk\)](#) [Bartholomaei de Cotton, Monachi Norwicensis, Historia Anglicana, \(A.D. 449-1298.\)](#) [Necnon Eiusdem Liber de Archiepiscopis Et Episcopis Angliae - Google Play Books](#) An English translation on pp. 437-38 of this volume was first published by H.T. Riley in his *Chronicles of the Mayors and Sheriffs of London 1188-1274* (London, 1863), 'Appendix: The Treason of Sir Thomas de Turberville', pp. 293-95: [Appendix: The treason of Sir Thomas de Turberville | British History Online \(british-history.ac.uk\)](#). Riley's translation was in turn based on an earlier edition of the Cotton text by G.J. Aungier in *Croniques de London*, Camden Soc. (London, 1844), pp. 97-103: [Croniques de London, depuis l'an 44 Hen. III. jusqu'à l'an 17 Edw. III : Aungier, George James : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) On this text see David Cox, 'The French Chronicle of London' in *Medium Ævum* 45 (1976), 201-8.

<sup>6</sup> J.G. Edwards, 'The Treason of Thomas Turberville 1295' in *Studies in Medieval History presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke*, ed. R.W. Hunt et al. (OUP, 1948), pp. 296-309 (298-99).

<sup>7</sup> Respectively ed. H. Rothwell 1957, pp. 252-54; ed. A. Gransden 1964, p. 128; ed. H.R. Luard 1869, p. 399. For the detail, see Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c. 550 to c. 1307* (London, 1974), p. 445.

<sup>8</sup> Ed. Isabel Aspin; Dean # 92. See pp. 14 below.

<sup>9</sup> Ed. Jean-Claude Thiolier; Dean # 66. See pp. 12 below.

<sup>10</sup> Ed. Luard 1890, vol.3, p. 282; see p. 18 below.

The original of the letter that Turberville sent to Paris has not survived, and we have to rely today on Bartholomew Cotton's contemporary copy of it. The actual document does, however, seem to have been preserved for some time following the execution. It is mentioned in a collection of memoranda formerly kept in the royal treasury in the Tower of London and now identified as National Archive C 47/27/3/31.<sup>11</sup>

The following is my re-edition of the Turberville episode from Bartholomew Cotton's *Historia Anglicana*, verified on the original manuscript, BL Cotton Nero C V, ff. 242r - 243r. I also provide a new English translation of the text.

[f. 242r] Eodem anno quidam miles, nomine Thomas Turbeville, captus a Francis in obsidione de Reuns et detentus in carcere dicti regis Francie, venit in Angliam proditiose, se dicens evasisse de carcere dicti regis Francie, qui benigne fuit susceptus a domino rege Anglie et multum honoratus. Sed cum aliquantulum stetisset in curia domini regis Anglie antedicti, voluit misisse quandam literam regi Francie, nuncius eiusdem eandem domino regi Anglie detulit, domini sui prodicionem seriatim indicans et expandens, quod proditor pretendens fugit, sed paulo post captus est. Tenor litere sue prodicionis talis fuit :

"A noble beer e seynur provost de Paris, syre duz, le seon home lige de ses meyns al boys de Viciens, saluz ! Cher syre, sachez ke jo suy venuz seyn et heté a la curt le rey de Engleterre, e si trovay le rey a Lundres, et muz de noveles me demaunda, dount jo ly diseye le meuz ke jo savoye. E sachez ke jo trovay terre de pes en Guales dunt jo ne [f. 242v] osay bayler la chose ke vus bien savez a Morgan. E sachez ke le rey ad byen granté pes et trowes, mes bien vous gardez et avisez ke nules trues ne pernez si ne seyt a vostre grant prou. Et sachez, si nules trues ne feysez, grant prou vus avendreyt, et ceo poez dire a luy, haut seignur.

E sachez ke jo trovay sire Johan le fiz Thomas a la curt le rey pur treter pes entre luy et le cunte de Nichole del cunté de Ulvester. Mes jeo ne saveye mie uncore coment la bosoyne se prendreyt, kar cete lettre fu fete le jur après ke les cardinaus furent respunduz, dunt jo ne oseye ren tucher de les bosoynes ke vus tuchent.

E sachez ke poy de garde i ad vers le su de la mer. E sachez ke Ille de Wycht est saunz garde.

E sachez ke le roy maunde en Alemyne .ii. cuntes, .ii. eveskes, et .ii. baruns pur parler et cunseyler al rey de Alemyne de ceste guerre.

Et sachez ke le roy maunde en Gascoyne .xx. neefs chargés de blee et de aveyne et de autre vitaille, e grant fuysun de argent, et sire Edmun frere al rey i ira, et le cunte de Nichole, sire Hue le Dispenser, le cunte de Warwyk, et muz des autres bone genz; et ceo poez dire a luy, haut seignur.

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<sup>11</sup> Edwards *art. cit.*, pp. 302-3, following Aungier *op. cit.*, pp. 97-103 (98).

E sachez ke nus quidoms aver assez a fere ver ceus de Escoce. E si ceus de Escoce se relevent contre le rey de Engleterre, lé Gualeys se releverunt autresi. E ceo ay jeo ben fest, et Morgan me ad ceo ben encovenaucé. Dunt jeo wus conseyl ke vus hastivement maundeiz granz genz en Escoce, kar si lenz poez entrer, a tuz jurs gayne le avez. E si vus voylez ke jeo la voyse, maundeiz al rey de Escoce ke il me trove a tote ma gent a lur custages honorablement.

Mé ben vus avisez si vus volez ke jo la voyse ou nun, kar jeo crey ke plus vostre pru freye pur attendre a la curt le rey pur espier et enquere noveles ke pur vus seent, qar tut ceo ke jeo pus enquere, jeo le vus fray asaver.

E me maundeiz Perot ke fut mon gardeyn en la prison u jeo fu, kar a luy diray chose ke jeo saveray des ore en avaunt, et par luy vus enveray les veies ke jeo ben say.

E pur Deu vus pri ke vous vous remembrez et avisez de les promesses qe vous moy promistes de par le haut seynur, ceo est a saver .c. livres de terre a moy et a mes heys. E pur Deu vus pri de mes enfaunz ke il ne eent nule defaute, taunt come il sunt en vostre garde, de manger ne de beyvre, ne de autre sustenance. E pur Deu vus pri ke vous avisez coment joe pus estre paé ensi, kar jeo ne ay ren, kar tut ay perdu ausi bien de ça come de la, et ren ne ay de vous, fors vostre grant leauté en quey jeo moy afy mut.

Hardiement vus afiez en le portur de ceste lettre et curteysie ly facez. E sachez ke en grant pour suy et en grant dute, kar acone genz unt suspeciun vers moy pur ceo ke jeo ay dyt ke jeo suy eschapé hors de la prison. Voz voluntez moy maundeiz en totes choses. A Deu, ke vous gard !"

Captus fuit predictus Thomas die sabbati proxima ante festum Sancti Michaelis, et ductus ad Turrim Londonie, et die sab[f. 243r]bati proxima post festum Sancte Fidis habuit suum judicium et sub forma subscripta exivit :

Il vint de la Tur monté un povere hakeney en une cote de raye, et chaucé de blanche chaucés, et sa teste coverte de une hovel, et ses peez lyez desuz le ventre del chival, et sé meyns lyez devant luy. Et furent chivachauz entur luy sys turmenturs a la furme del Deble atireez, et le un mena soen freyn et le hangeman sa chevestre, kar le chival ke luy porta aveyt le un et l'autre. Et en tel manere fut il mené de la Tur dekes a Weymocter parmy Londres. E feu jugé al des en la graunt sale, et sire Roger Brabazun luy dona soen jugement ke il fut treyné et pendu, et ke il pendereyt taunt come ren feut enter de ly. E il feut treyné sur un quir de bof fres de Weymocter al Cundut de Lundres et arere al Furches, et la est il pendu de une chene de fer, et pendra taunt ke ren de ly durer pura.

*In the same year [1295] a certain knight by the name of Thomas de Turberville, who had been taken prisoner by the French at the siege of Rions (Gironde) and thrown into jail by king [Philippe IV Le Bel] of France, crossed over to England, his mind bent on treason. He explained that he had escaped from the king of France's prison, and he was therefore warmly welcomed by our lord king [Edward I] of England and treated with great respect. After spending some considerable time at the king's court, he wanted to have a certain letter sent to the king of France. But his messenger took the letter instead to our lord the king of England, and was able to reveal to his sovereign, detail by detail, the full extent of the*

*knight's treachery. Acting on a premonition that he had, the traitor took flight, only to be arrested shortly afterwards. The tenor of his letter of treachery was as follows :*

*"To the noble baron lord provost of Paris: my kind sir, greetings from his liege man, [as duly sworn] with my hands [in yours] in the Bois de Vincennes. My dear lord, you should know that I arrived safe and sound at the king of England's court. I caught up with the king in London, and he asked me for news on a large number of subjects, and I answered as best I knew how. You should also know that I have been to Wales and have to report that I found the country to be at peace, as a result of which I did not dare hand over you-know-what to Morgan [ap Maredudd]. You should know also that the king has in fact granted a truce and concluded a peace agreement, but I urge you to be very much on your guard and to beware of agreeing to any truce yourself unless it be very much to your own advantage. You should know also that, were you not to agree to any truce, this would be very much to your advantage, and this is something that you can possibly report to you-know-whom, the lord superior.*

*You should know, in addition, that at the king's court I encountered sir Jean fitz Thomas who was there holding discussions with the earl of Lincoln concerning the county of Ulster. But at the time I was not aware of how these discussions would work out, since the present letter was written on the day following the response to the cardinals' petition being issued, and for this reason I did not dare even mention those matters that concern yourself.*

*And you should know that there are very few patrols along the south coast, and you should know also that there is no garrison on the Isle of Wight.*

*And you should know that the king has sent two earls, two bishops and two barons to Germany to keep the king there informed about the present war, and to offer advice.*

*You should know also that the king is dispatching twenty boatloads of grain, oats and other provisions to Gascony, along with a huge amount of cash, and that the king's brother, the lord Edmund, the earl of Lincoln, sir Hugh Despenser, the earl of Warwick and many other high-ranking men will be going as well. And this is also something that you can possibly report to you-know-whom, the lord superior.*

*You should know that we believe we are due to have our hands full with the people of Scotland. If the Scots rebel against the king of England, the Welsh will rebel also. This is something I have already had a part to play in, and Morgan has made me a firm promise as far as he is concerned. My advice to you is to send a large contingent of armed men to Scotland without delay, for once you succeed in gaining entry to the country, it will be yours for evermore. And if you want me to go there myself, send word to the king of Scots that he do the honourable thing and undertake to pay my expenses and those of my men.*

*But consider carefully whether or not you want me to go, for my own opinion is that I would be of more use to you if I stayed at Edward's court and carried on spying and looking out for the sort of information that would be beneficial to you, since I will be able to let you know everything I am able to find out.*

*And send me Pierrot who was my warden when I was in prison, for I will tell him everything I get to know from now on, and send it to you through him by methods that are already familiar to me.*

*And I beg you in God's name to remember and keep the promises you made me on behalf of you-know-who, the lord superior, that is that I and my heirs be granted one hundred librates of land. And in God's name I beg you, as long as my children are in your care, that they are not deprived of food or drink or of any other means of support. And in God's name I beg you to think of how I also might be paid, for I have lost everything I had both in France and in England and have nothing at present, and the only thing you have sent me yourself is your great loyalty to me, and in this I place all my trust.*

*Have absolute confidence in the person who delivers this letter, and treat him with kindness and generosity. You should know that I am living in great fear and anxiety, for there are some people who are suspicious of me for saying that I escaped from prison. Let me know whatever it is that you require of me. Adieu, and may God keep you safe!"*

*The aforesaid Thomas was arrested on the Saturday before the feast of St Michael [September 24] and taken to the Tower of London. On the Saturday following the feast of St Faith [October 8] he had his trial, and in the following manner he departed this life :*

*He came from the Tower mounted on a small, shabby saddle-horse and dressed in a cheap striped cloth coat. He was wearing plain footwear and had a simple cap on his head. His feet had been tied together under the horse's belly, and he was holding his bound hands out in front of him. Round him rode an execution team of six men dressed in Devil costumes. One of these kept hold of the bridle of the traitor's horse, and the hangman himself held the halter with which it was also equipped. This is how he was brought from the Tower right across London to Westminster. Judgement was passed on him from the dais of the Great [Westminster] Hall by [the royal judge] sir Roger Brabazon. The verdict that he handed down was that Turberville should be drawn and hanged, and that he should remain hanging until his body had decomposed entirely. From Westminster he was dragged on an ox's rawhide as far as the Grand Conduit [in Cheapside], and from there back again to the [Smithfield] gallows. Here he was strung up on an iron chain, and here he will stay hanging until no trace of his body can possibly remain.*

It is surely beyond doubt that Tuberville's is a genuine personal letter. That he should have been literate enough, at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, to write his own secret letter is not surprising. As well as witnessing a spectacular efflorescence in the production of vernacular literature, the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century had also been an era marked by the gradual emergence of secular literacy.<sup>12</sup> The use of the French vernacular in secular correspondence dates back to at least the 1230s, or so the extant evidence would suggest.<sup>13</sup> The majority of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Norman letters can be categorised as formal, official or political, and few qualify as personal correspondence or give the impression of having a recognisable individuality. Reading, for example, Simon de

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<sup>12</sup> Ralph V. Turner, 'The *miles literatus* in 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century England: how rare a phenomenon?', *American Historical Review* 83 (1978), 928-45; F.H. Bäuml, 'Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy', *Speculum* 55 (1980), 237-65; Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1993); Martin Aurell, *Le Chevalier lettré: savoir et conduite de l'aristocratie aux XII<sup>e</sup> et XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Frédéric Tanquerey, *Recueil de lettres anglo-françaises 1265-1399* (Paris, 1916): [Recueil de lettres anglo-françaises, 1265-1399 : Tanquerey, Frédéric Joseph : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Montfort's letter to Henry III reporting on the Gascony campaign of 1249 or his 1261 deposition,<sup>14</sup> one struggles to hear a truly personal voice. Similar formality characterises also the business letters from noble ladies such as Aline widow of Hugh Despenser in 1272-74, and Maud Pantouff's letter to the bishop of Bath written in 1281.<sup>15</sup> The same is true of the female petitioners whose letters have been preserved in public records.<sup>16</sup> Even in the voluminous body of letters written in French by queen Eleanor de Provence, personal touches are few and far between.<sup>17</sup>

Very few of the surviving letters, in other words, give convincing evidence of having avoided passing through a clerical intermediary (except, of course, for the actual copying of the letter onto parchment, a skill unlikely to have been acquired by the semi-literate laity by this date). Thomas de Turberville's account of his spying activities, however, by its very secrecy, must come as close to reflecting the correspondent's *ipsissima verba* as any other contemporary letter. This sense of the informal, the personal, the private is borne out in particular by its stylistic features: there is something spontaneous in its simplicity, its lack of rhetoric, its directness, its restricted lexis, its straightforward syntax, its lack of subordination, and its insistent staccato of *sachez, sachez, sachez*. There is, in short, an essential orality in the letter that would seem to guarantee its authenticity.

According to Turberville's own account of his activities after his return to England, he attended Edward's court where he was well received, before going on to Wales where he was due to collude with the chieftain of the Welsh of Glamorgan, Morgan ap Maredudd. Thereafter he visited different parts of the country arranging various transactions – all the while gathering information that would be useful to those seeking to harm the interests of the kingdom. This information he then forwarded, in writing, to king Philippe IV through a trusted intermediary. This was, he tells us himself, the provost of Paris, to whom Turberville had formally sworn allegiance, and with whom he had left his two sons as sureties for his loyalty to the French crown.

There is no firm evidence available to tell us how exactly Turberville's espionage came to be exposed, and the unmasking of the traitor is one of the few elements of the different narratives that show some degree of divergence. The differences, however, prove to be of little consequence. The version found in the Anglo-Norman poem is non-committal: Turberville's original letter was simply intercepted and then shown directly to Edward: *le bref ly [to Edward] fut mustré*.<sup>18</sup> Langtoft gives a more circumstantial (and perhaps more imaginative) account: it was an English cleric who had previously been in the French king's service who discovered the treason, and he in turn wrote a letter of denunciation to one of Edward's officials: *a un des privez le roi une lettre rescrist*.<sup>19</sup> It is not made clear whether or not this was the same cleric who had been responsible for actually writing out Turberville's report for him. The third alternative, that of the Cotton chronicler, is simpler and perhaps more realistic: he points the finger of blame at Turberville's personal messenger whose task

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<sup>14</sup> *Royal and other Historical Letters ...*, ed. W.W. Shirley (London, 1866), vol. 2, pp. 52-53; Ian Short, 'The Will and Deposition of Simon de Montfort: edition and translation' in Darren Baker, *Simon de Montfort and the Rise of the English Nation* (Stroud, 2018), pp. 218-29.

<sup>15</sup> Tanqueray *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11, 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Anglo-Norman Letters and Petitions ...*, ed. M. Dominica Legge, ANTS (Oxford, 1941), letters 34, 38, 42, 43 etc. Legge, p. 161, draws attention to a rare and untypical flash of humour from a letter of the 1380s: 'De lui ne sai je plus mes q'il est droit bon ami a lui mesmes; je ne puisse percevoir en fait que s'amistee extende plus outre a nulluy' – 'I know no more about him than that he is a true and good friend to himself; in fact I cannot see that his friendship extends to anyone else but himself.'

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Howell, *Eleanor of Provence: queenship in 13<sup>th</sup>-century England* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 293-99. Letters 41, 64 and 65 in Tanqueray's collection are from queen Eleanor.

<sup>18</sup> See p. 15 below.

<sup>19</sup> See p. 13 below.

it had been to take the incriminating letter to Paris for him. Given the fact, however, that the incriminating letter has survived, we may safely assume that Turberville's message to his Parisian contact was indeed intercepted, and in this case the most obvious culprit would be the messenger to whom he had entrusted it and who then turned informer. Edwards proposes the name of one Robert of Crowland who in 1317 was rewarded by Edward II for the role he had played *prenaunt Thomas de Turbeville enemy nostre dit piere*.<sup>20</sup> Evidence that king Edward I already had suspicions about Turberville's behaviour is provided by the record of a payment he made on the day before the culprit's arrest to one William Wither for having kept the suspect under surveillance in Gloucestershire.<sup>21</sup> In circumstances that may not be altogether clear today, but which leave no doubt as to his guilt, Turberville had been unmasked and the threat he posed to national security nipped in the bud.

The Hagnaby Chronicle specifies that immediately after his treason was discovered, Turberville attempted to escape to Wales: *li malveis se aparceust que la treison fust descovert, se mist a la fuite, mes tost fu remené, treit e pendu*.<sup>22</sup> According to Turberville's own account of his spying activities, he had already been to Wales where it had been his intention to deliver 'a certain something' (he refers to it as *la chose ke vos bien savez* when reporting to Paris) to Morgan ap Maredudd. If this mysterious object was, as one might assume, a secret communication directly from the French crown, it would have been a highly sensitive document which would almost certainly have incriminated Turberville himself. Hence, perhaps, his eventual reluctance to deliver it. This might, in Edwards' view, be the letter referred to in the memoranda listed today in the National Archives, in a record formerly kept in the royal treasury in the Tower of London.<sup>23</sup>

When his betrayal is finally revealed, Turberville is quickly found and arrested on September 24<sup>th</sup>. He is tried in Westminster Hall on October 6<sup>th</sup> before the chief justice of the king's bench – a sure sign of the importance attached at the time to this sort of exceptionally serious crime by a member of the nobility. He is hanged in public two days later. The judgement of the court stipulates that his corpse is to remain hanging on the gallows until every trace of it has disappeared.

Contemporary historical writers could hardly be expected to resist the temptation of elaborating on Turberville's theatrical and gruesome end. The relish with which his last moments are described in Cotton's chronicle, for example, is palpable and strongly suggests an eye-witness source of some literary skill. For his extended and detailed narrative, Cotton reverts to the French vernacular, and the verve with which it is recounted, and its plethora of realistic detail, stand in strong contrast not only to Turberville's own artless style of writing, but also to the sobriety of the historiographical discourse that characterises surviving accounts of the execution.

To take one example, the execution team, described as comprising six men dressed as devils accompanying the hangman,<sup>24</sup> comes straight out of contemporary mystery plays.<sup>25</sup> According to Marie [de France]'s vision of Purgatory, these tormenters-cum-torturers were a category of demons

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<sup>20</sup> *Art. cit.*, pp. 304-6, citing *Close Rolls 1313-18*, p. 463.

<sup>21</sup> National Archive E 404/1/5, cited by Prestwich, *Edward I*, p. 383 note.

<sup>22</sup> BL MS Cotton Vespasian B XI, f. 38v.

<sup>23</sup> C 47/27/3/31. Another memorandum within the same document seems to allude to the original letter that Turberville sent to Paris and which survives today only in Bartholomew Cotton's copy. See Edwards *art. cit.*, pp. 302-3.

<sup>24</sup> Above, pp. 4 and 6.

<sup>25</sup> Hans-Jurgen Diller, 'The Torturers in the English Mystery Plays' in *Medieval English Theatre* 11 (1989), 57-65. Cf. the four attendants leading the horses that tear apart the body of the traitor Ganelon in the *Chanson de Roland* 3967.



whose specialist role was to further persecute those already found guilty of sin.<sup>26</sup> They give the impression of being an integral part of execution rituals under Edward I.<sup>27</sup>

The small detail, to take another example, of Turberville being executed by means of an iron chain (*la est il pendu de une chene de fer*),<sup>28</sup> might, at first sight, strike today's reader as no more than a chillingly evocative symbol – a poetic invention, perhaps, from the pen of a talented chronicler. It proves, however, to have been a traditional practice in a particular category of execution. In purely practical terms, the use of a simple rope noose would clearly not have been compatible with the judge's explicit instruction, in Turberville's case, that this traitor's corpse was not to be cut down after hanging but left to rot to extinction on the gallows in full public view. The iron chain referred to here was, in fact, a sign of iniquity reserved for the punishment of those found guilty of especially contemptible crimes, those that directly undermined royal power.<sup>29</sup> Of these, treason was, of course, the one that most seriously jeopardised the bonds of trust that lay at the root of social order. Lèse-majesté, in the view of Bracton, 'exceeded in turpitude all other crimes'.<sup>30</sup>

Exactly what the crime a man-at-arms called Cornwall had been found guilty of in 1366 is not made clear, but it was obviously serious enough for him to be hanged in public along with a motley collection of assorted sinners. Whereas the latter were judged worthy of dying by the rope, the former was singled out for the iron chain:

Quo anno [1366] ante festum sancti Barnabe apostoli, Londoniis, quidam serviens ad arma cognomine Cornwaille cum scorta sua, filio et coco, qui in latrociniiis, sacrilegiis, adulteriis virginum ac matronarum defloratione et homicidiis convicti fuerant, ille cathena ferrea, ceteri funibus suspendebantur.<sup>31</sup>

*In the year 1366, before the feast of St Barnabas the apostle [June 11] in London, a certain man-at-arms surnamed Cornwall, together with his escort, his son and his cook, and alongside assorted robbers, thieves of consecrated property, adulterers accused of ravishing both young girls and women, and killers, were convicted and hanged – the man-at-arms with an iron chain, the others with ropes.*

John Despenser, son of Hugh Despenser the Younger (himself the victim of a gory execution in 1362), was murdered in June 1366 in a particularly vile and degrading manner, which led to the supposed instigator of the crime being drawn and quartered, but which earned both of the murderers the iron chain. Treason not being at issue here, the use of the chain probably reflects the exceptional shamelessness of the crime:

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<sup>26</sup> Marie [de France], *Espurgatoire seint Patriz*, ed. Yolande de Pontfarcy (Paris, 1995), line 1114.

<sup>27</sup> Katherine Royer, 'The Body in Parts: reading the execution ritual in late medieval England' in *Historical Reflections* 29 (2003), 319-39 (327-32). Cf. the same author's *The English Execution Narrative 1200-1700* (Abingdon, 2015); E. Cohen, 'Symbols of culpability and the universal language of justice: the ritual of public executions in later medieval Europe' in *History of European Ideas* 11 (1989), 407-16. Cf. also W.R.J. Barron, 'The penalties for treason in medieval life and literature' in *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981), 187-202.

<sup>28</sup> See p. 4 above.

<sup>29</sup> The chain as a means of execution needs to be distinguished, here and below, from 'hanging in chains' in the sense of post-mortem gibbeting.

<sup>30</sup> Bellamy, *The Law of Treason...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Chronica Johannis de Reading ...*, ed. James Tait (Manchester, 1914), pp. 175-76.

Alii duo scelerati qui Johannem Spenser ... in stercolino crudeliter occisum projecerunt, unus tractus sed ambo cathenis suspensi sunt.<sup>32</sup>

*Of the two other criminals who killed John Despenser ... and threw his body, with deplorable cruelty, onto a dung heap, one was first drawn, but both were hanged with chains.*

In the case of John [II] de Mowbray, executed in March 1322 following his capture at the battle of Boroughbridge, the charge of treason against Edward II was self-evident, and he suffers the indignity of being both drawn and hanged with the iron chain:

Apud Eboracum domini Johannes de Mowbray, Rogerus de Clifforde et Gocelinus Deyvyllle per recordum et processum predictos trahuntur et cum cathenis ferreis suspenduntur.<sup>33</sup>

*In accordance with the legal proceedings and the written record thereof, lords John de Mowbray, Roger de Clifford and Jocelyn d'Eyville are drawn and hanged with iron chains at York.*

In 1184, despite a dramatic last-minute intervention by Baldwin bishop of Worcester, one Gilbert de Plumpton was executed – once again with a chain of iron around his neck:

Episcopus ... ascenso equo, secutus est cursu veloci carnifices qui iuvenem ducebant ad patibulum. Et iam eo perventum erat, iamque ligatis manibus iuvenis post tergum, et gleba viridi oculos operiente, et catena ferrea circumdata collo ... supervenit episcopus.<sup>34</sup>

*The bishop mounted his horse and set off at full speed in pursuit of the team of executioners who were taking the young man to the gallows. Hardly had they arrived at the place of execution, and tied the young man's hands behind his back, and covered his eyes with a strip of freshly cut turf, and placed an iron chain around his neck ... than up rode the bishop.*

A rare example of the hangman's iron chain acquiring the status of a relic is the curious case of William fitz Osbern. A self-styled *salvator pauperum*, William's eloquence (*habensque cornua similia agni loqueretur ut draco*) earned him the leadership of an insurrection in London in 1196 and an eventual public execution as a traitor to the king:

Captus itaque et juri exhibitus, iudicio curiae regiae prius equis distractus ac deinde patibulo appensus est cum sociis novem.<sup>35</sup>

*So he was arrested and brought before the law. The judgement of the king's court was that he should be first drawn apart and quartered by horses, and then hanged on the gallows together with nine of his fellow conspirators.*

His supporters, however, were determined to make a martyr of him:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 176.

<sup>33</sup> *Gesta Edwardi de Carnarvon in Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, ed. W. Stubbs (London, 1882), vol. 2, p. 78.

<sup>34</sup> [*Benedict of Peterborough*] *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi ...*, ed. W. Stubbs (London, 1867), vol. 1, p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> *William of Newburgh, Historia rerum Anglicarum*, ed. R. Howlett in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I* (London, 1884), vol. 2, pp. 466-73 (471-72).

Denique, ut fertur, quidam sacerdos propinquus eius catenam, qua vinetus fuerat, febricitanti superposuit, et salutem mox consecutam ... confinxit ... Patibulum quo suspensus fuerat ... de loco supplicii furto nocturno sublatum est, terra quoque supposita, tanquam sanguine consecrata suspensi ... per minutias a fatuis est abrasa.

*Then, so the story ran, a certain priest, who happened to be a relative of his, placed the chain with which he had been hanged on the body of a man suffering from a fever, and claimed that the man had been immediately cured. ... Under the cover of darkness, the gibbet on which fitz Osbern had been hanged was furtively removed from the place of execution, and the soil below it, as if made sacred by the blood that had fallen on it, was scooped up in handfuls by the gullible.*

The iron chain serves, then, as a significant stage prop in the theatre of the medieval public execution. In categorising public hangings as ceremonies of punishment and revenge, Michel Foucault draws attention to their essentially ritualistic nature. In their brutal violence, the rituals in question are designed not merely to terrify but to terrorise the onlooker.<sup>36</sup> As social spectacle and entertainment for the medieval masses, public torture falls easily into the category of high drama. Its theatricality serves to familiarise the politically powerless with the strength of the powerful, and to re-affirm the morality that those in authority seek to inculcate. In their production as well as in their reception, the rituals of hanging reflect a vengeful and compassionless society forged in the image of a punitive deity.

In terms of its documentary value, Turberville's letter can clearly qualify as an authentic historical source. As such, it has the additional advantage of having a named author, of being precisely dated, to August 1295<sup>37</sup> and localised to London. Its sole surviving text was copied into Cotton's chronicle either contemporaneously or no more than a year or two after the event. But by virtue of the context in which the chronicler situates his bilingual narrative, notably the vivid eye-witness description in French that he adds of Turberville's execution, it is not without literary merit. In the history of medieval literature and culture, it deserves at least a passing mention.

The chance survival of the Turberville letter provides the modern reader with the opportunity of listening to the personal voice of the protagonist in a drama of treason and punishment at the court of Edward I. What is particularly striking in Cotton's narrative of this courtier's rise and fall is the rapidity and inevitability with which events succeed one another. A mere four months separate the mundane cause from its fatal effect. Hardly has Turberville allowed his self-interest to override his duty, his instinct for self-preservation to compromise his self-esteem, when he finds himself reaping the wages of feudal sin. Forbidden the chivalric death due to a member of the nobility (but spared the life-long indignity of that other ugly face of medieval criminal law, mutilation),<sup>38</sup> he becomes the ultimate victim of contemporary penal justice. He faces death by public humiliation, torture and hanging, without even the consolation of a Christian burial. As an

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<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir ...* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 53: "La cérémonie punitive est ... terrorisante"; cf. also pp. 115, 133, 188; trans. as *Discipline and Punishment ...* by Alan Sheridan (Penguin, 1977).

<sup>37</sup> Edwards *art. cit.* pp. 299-300 calculates that it was written on 7<sup>th</sup> of August.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings ...* (OUP, 2000), pp. 184-85.

integral part of this sanctioned theatre of barbarity, the ritual of the iron chain serves as a grisly reminder to the ghoulish bystanders of the fate awaiting the worst outcasts of medieval society. Thomas de Turberville stands as an exemplar of those whose politically-motivated actions are seen as endangering the very basis of feudal society. Their crime is considered so heinous as to put them permanently beyond the Christian pale, thereby allowing their humanity to be dismissively and cruelly denied.

## APPENDIX

The text of Pierre de Langtoft's *Règne d'Édouard 1<sup>er</sup>*, written shortly after 1295, reproduces lines 772-814 of Jean-Claude Thiolier's edition, *Pierre de Langtoft, Le Règne d'Édouard 1<sup>er</sup>, édition critique et commentée* (Paris, 1989). This is based on London College of Arms MS Arundel XIV, ff. 133r-147r, copied in the early years of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, probably in the Crowland - Peterborough area. The more extensive Anglo-Norman chronicle of which the history of Edward I's reign forms part was edited by Thomas Wright in the Rolls Series in 1866. More than twenty MSS of it survive today. An inferior text of Langtoft's Turberville episode can be found in Thomas Wright's *Political Songs of England* (London, 1839, repr. ed. P.R. Coss, 1996), pp. 278-81. For further details, see Dean # 66, and Thea Summerfield, 'The Anglo-Scottish Conflict in Romance and in Rhyme' in Andy King & David Simpkin (eds.), *England and Scotland at War c. 1296 – c. 1513* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 19-38. The translation that follows is mine.

... Thomas de Turbeville, qui a Ryons fu pris,  
Tant ad acovenanté al provost de Paris  
Que fait li ad homage e ostages ad pris  
De ses deus fiz en gage, e seurement l'ad promis  
Aler en Engleterre espier le païs,  
E dire al roi Edward que venuz est fuitifs,  
Eschapé de prison parmi ses enemis.  
Li provost tost s'assent e fait li ad escriz  
De cent livreez de terre par autiel devis.  
E Thomas l'asseure sur les evangeliz  
Que trestuz les Engleis, Waleis e Marchis  
Serront enclinanz a Phelip, fiz Lowis.

Ore escotez coment li beneit Jhesu Crist  
Nostre seignur sire Edward de la traison garnist.  
Thomas tost en Engleterre al roi vint e dist  
Que hors de la prison de nuitant issist,  
E que pur la sue amur en tiel peril se mist ;  
Assez de curtoisie li rois le contrefist.  
Mais Thomas après ceo de jour en jor enquist  
Le consail d'Engleterre e tut l'estat supprist,

E od les .ii. cardinals un des soens tramist  
 E manda en sa lettre al provost avant dit  
 Le privé consail le roi tut sicom il l'oïst.  
 Mais un clerc d'Engleterre la traison entendist,  
 Qui od le roi de France demorat e servist,  
 S'aparceut del compassement, cum Deu le vousist.  
 A un des privez le roi une lettre rescrist  
 E la traison Turbeville apertement descoverist.  
 Quant ceo entent, li lieres durement s'esbaïst,  
 Mais eschaper se cuide e a la fuite se mist.  
 Mais un sergant d'armes assez pres le siwist  
 Si que dedenz le tierz jor le traître susprist.

Lors est pris cist traitres e a Londres remené  
 Od tres grant fausine que sur li fu trové,  
 Car choses que sont dites en consail a celé  
 Les ad tuz mis en brief pur avoir ultre mandé.  
 Ceo ad li lieres al derain reconu e conté.  
 Turbeviles est en curt traitres esprové,  
 Si est detrait as chevaux a Londres la cité,  
 E puis pendu cum lieres par jugement doné,  
 E ses .ii. filzen ostage par dela decolé.  
 Loez seit Nostre Sire Deu qui tant ad laboré  
 Pur le roi Edward e pur sa sauveté ! ...

*Thomas de Turberville, who had been taken prisoner at Rions, came to an agreement with the provost of Paris, as a result of which he did homage to the Frenchman. He handed over his two sons as hostages and pledges for the solemn promise he had made to cross over to England and act as a spy there. He would explain to king Edward that he came to him as a fugitive, a prisoner of war who had escaped from prison from under the noses of his enemies. The provost was quick to agree to this plan, and issued a writ for one hundred librates of land to be granted to Turberville on those terms. Thomas pledged his word by swearing on the Gospels that all the English, including the inhabitants of Wales and the marcher lands, would become subjects of king Louis' son Philippe le Bel.*

*Hear now how, by the grace of Jesus Christ, our lord sir Edward was forewarned of the treason to come. Thomas hurried back to England and came into the king's presence to explain how, at considerable danger to himself and out of love for his lord, he had escaped from prison under the cover of darkness. For this the king rewarded him with numerous acts of kindness. From then on, Thomas was able to keep himself informed, day by day, of all the country's secrets and spy on everything that was happening in England. Using one of his personal messengers who travelled to France with the cardinals, he sent a letter to Paris relaying what had been said in the king's Privy Council exactly as he had heard it himself. But an English cleric, who had spent some time at the French king's court and worked there, realised, as God intended him to, that there was some sort of conspiracy afoot. He in turn wrote a letter which he then sent to one of king Edward's closest advisers, showing incontrovertibly that Turberville was a traitor. On getting wind of this, the criminal was terrified and immediately attempted to escape by running away. But a serjeant at arms followed hot on his heels and arrested the traitor three days later.*

*Once he had been taken prisoner, the traitor was brought back to London. Here accusations of high treason were laid against him for having set down in writing secret information that had been discussed in strict confidence, and for having sent it abroad [to the enemy] for personal gain. In the end, the criminal owned up to this and confessed. In court Turberville was found guilty of treason, and was accordingly drawn apart by horses, dragged across London and then hanged like a common thief, as his sentence demanded. His two sons who were being held hostage in France were decapitated. Praise be to our Lord God for having laboured so hard in favour of king Edward and kept him safe!*

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A single copy survives of the Anglo-Norman octosyllabic poem on Thomas de Turberville's treason (Dean # 92). It is in MS London BL Cotton Caligula A XVIII, f. 23r-v, copied in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. On the MS see Diana Tyson, 'The Siege of Caerlaverock: A re-examination' in *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 46 (2002), 45-69. The Turberville poem seems to have been composed between 1295 and 1297. The Anglo-Norman text here reproduces Isabel Aspin's edition in *Anglo-Norman Political Songs*, ANTS (Oxford, 1953), V, pp. 49-55. Curiously the name of king Philippe is given as Charles, and this we have corrected in our translation. The 98 octosyllables of the poem were first edited by Francisque Michel in 1834, and subsequently by G.J. Aungier in *Croniques de London* (London, 1844), pp. 100-103.

Seignurs e dames escutez,  
De un fort tretur orrez  
Ke aveit purveu une treson;  
Thomas Turbelvile ot a non.  
A Charlys aveit premis,  
E juré par seint Denys,  
Ke il li freit tute Engleterre  
Par quentise e treson conquere.  
E Charles li premist grant don,  
Teres e bon garison.  
Li treitre a Charlis dit  
Ke il aparillast sanz respit  
De bone nef grande navie,  
E de gent forte conpaignie,  
E il le freit par tens garner  
Ou il dussent ariver  
En Engleterre sodeinement.  
Li traiture sanz targement  
En Engleterre tot se mit.  
Au rei sire Edewars vint e dist  
Ke si après li vodera fere  
Tutes les choses deust conquer  
Ke sire Charlis li aveit  
A force e a tort tollet.

Issi ke li losengur  
De ambe part fu tratur.  
Sire Edeward n'entendi mie  
Del treitre sa tricherie  
Ke il aveit issi purveu.  
A grant honur le ad receu,  
E en sa curt fut grant mestre.  
Quant ot espié tut son estre  
E le conseil de Engleter,  
Li treitre feseit un bref fere  
A sire Charlis privément,  
Ou ariver deussent sa gent  
En Engletere e li païs prendre.  
A sire Edeward fu fet entendre,  
Cum Deu le out destiné,  
E le bref ly fut mustré,  
E tout ensemble la treson.  
Li rei fit prendre cel felon,  
Thomas le treitur devant dit,  
Ke fist fere cel escrit.  
A Lundres, par mie la citee,  
Treigner le fist, en une coree  
De une tor envelopé;  
Nul autrement ne fut armé,  
Haume n'out ne habergun.  
Cillante pierres a grant fusiun  
Aveit il entour son flanc  
Ke li raerent le sanc.  
Aprés fu li traiture pendu  
E le alme ala a Belzebub rendu.  
Ne aveit autre gareson.  
Issi deit l'en servir felon.  
En furches pent li malurez,  
Des chenes e de fer liez;  
Nul home ne'l deit enterrer.  
Tant cum son cors porra durer  
Iloec pendra cel trichur;  
Teu garison ad pur son labour.  
Ore purra Charles pur ver  
Aprés li longement garder,  
Einz k'il venge pur la treison  
Demander de li garison.  
Sire Edeward pur la grant navye  
De France ne dona une aille;  
De vaillante gent fist la mer  
De tut part mut ben garder.  
De Engleter sunt failliz  
Ly Franceys e sunt honiz.  
En la mer grant tens floterent;  
Li pors plusurs de eus tuerent:

A Doveire firent sodoinement  
 Une assaut, e de lur gent  
 Plus de .v. sent y perdirent;  
 Unkes plus de prou ne firent.  
 Ore sunt tuz, jeo quide, neëz  
 Ou en lur teris retornez  
 E penduz pur lur servise,  
 Ke Engleter n'aveyent prise;  
 E ceo Charles lour premist  
 Si nul de eus revenist.  
 Sire Charles, bon chevaler,  
 Lessez ester ton guerrer,  
 Acordez a ton cosin  
 E purpensez de la fin.  
 Si Engleter guerirez,  
 Jammés ben n'espleyterez.  
 Ne ne firent voz ancestres  
 Ke se tindrent si grant mestres:  
 Ly ducs Lowys, ton parent,  
 Estace le Moyne ensement  
 E autres Franceys asseez  
 Ke ne sunt pas ici nomez.  
 Damnedeu omnipotent  
 Vous doynt bon acordement ! Amen.

*Just listen, my lords and ladies, and you will hear how an evil traitor named Thomas Turberville plotted an act of treason. He promised [king Philippe] and swore by St Denis that, by a cunning act of treason, he would enable him to conquer the whole of England. [The king] promised to reward Thomas for this with generous gifts of land and a lavish income. The traitor advised [Philippe] to immediately fit out a large fleet of sturdy boats and to engage a powerful body of troops, while he himself would let him know in due course where in England he should make his surprise landing.*

*The traitor lost no time in crossing over to England to speak with lord Edward. He told him that he was ready henceforth to serve him and do anything that was necessary to win back all that lord [Philippe] had seized in war and taken illegally from him. This is how the smooth-talking Turberville became a traitor to each of the two sides. Lord Edward was quite unaware of the treacherous plot he was hatching. He treated him with great respect, welcoming him into his court where he became one of its leading lights. The traitor spied on everything that was going on at court and got to know England's state secrets. He then had a letter written and sent surreptitiously to [king Philippe], indicating where in England his army should land before going on to conquer the country.*

*All this came to the ears of lord Edward, just as God had intended it to. The king was shown the letter and was able to understand the full extent of the treason that was being committed, so he ordered the arrest of the treacherous Thomas, author of the letter. He had him drawn, dragging him right across London divested of his knightly helmet and hauberk and wrapped in an ox-hide. He was dragged over innumerable sharp stones, as a result of which his lower body was streaming with blood. The traitor was then hanged, and his soul*



*surrendered to Beelzebub. No other outcome was possible; this is how criminals have to be treated. This evil creature hangs there on the gallows attached by chains of iron, and no one is entitled to bury him. He will continue hanging there, this double-crossing traitor, until nothing of his body remains. This is the reward he gets for all his hard work.*

*Now [Philippe] will have a long wait if he expects to see him come back to claim what he is owed for his treachery. As for lord Edward, he does not give a fig for France's huge fleet. He has the coastline closely guarded in every direction by his valiant troops. The French have failed in their invasion of England, and it is very much to their shame. They stay a long time at anchor off the shore, and many of them are killed by those defending the ports. The French mount a surprise attack on Dover in which they lose more than five hundred of their men. This was all the success they had. By now they are all drowned, I suppose, or have found their way back home only to be hanged for dereliction of duty in failing to conquer England. This is what their [king] had promised them, should any of them ever come back.*

*My lord [Philippe], fine knight that you are, give up this war of yours, make peace with your kinsman, and have a thought for how all this can end. Waging war against England will never get you anywhere. Your ancestors, who had such a high opinion of themselves, never succeeded either, nor did your kinsman duke Louis, or Eustace the Monk, or any number of other Frenchmen I could name.*

*May the Lord God Almighty grant that you come to an amicable peace agreement. Amen.*

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Rebaptizing Turberville as Thomas of Troublesville, the *Flores Historiarum* in Eton College Library MS 123, formerly believed to have been written at Merton Priory, but now attributed to St Albans and Westminster, commemorate him with the following epitaph. The text is that of H.R. Luard in his Rolls Society edition of 1890, vol. III, p. 282. The attempt at translation is mine.

Turbat tranquilla clam Thomas Turbida Villa,  
Qui quasi scintilla fuit, accidit ecce favilla.  
Cum Sathanae turbis est vici, scopa fit urbis,  
Stratus pelle bovis, frustratur Gallica quo vis.  
Terram turbavit Thomas, haec hunc cruciavit.  
Hinc cum se stravit quem bis, ter, equus laceravit,  
Achitophel perit, aspera David modo quaerit,  
Thomas pependit, Anglos dum munere vendit.

*Thomas of Troublesville, that secret disturber of the peace, | once a shining star, is now, lo!, a burnt-out cinder. | When the Satanic rabble take to the streets, he turns into the city's sweeper | stretched out on an ox-hide, and the French are foiled wherever you want. | Thomas disturbed the land, tormenting it from end to end. | So now the horse has torn him apart, not twice but thrice, as he lay sprawling on the ground. | By seeking to harm David, Achitophel also lost his life. | For selling the English in return for a bribe, Thomas has paid the price by hanging.*

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### Anglo-Norman *quir fres* 'rawhide'

Found guilty of treason in 1295 for spying at Edward I's court for king Philippe le Bel, Thomas Turberville was dragged through the streets of London before being hanged: *il feut treyné sur un quir de bof fres de Weymocter al Cundut de Lundres* [in Cheapside] *et arere al Furches* [in Smithfield], *et la est il pendu*.

For the attentive reader, the adjective *fres* adds a particularly unexpected detail to the drama of this execution narrative, and raises the question of exactly what we are to understand by *un quir de bof fres*. Ever since Riley's 1863 English rendering of this passage from Bartholomew Cotton's *Historia Anglicana (Chronicles of the Mayors and Sheriffs of London 1188-1274*, ed. H.T. Riley (London, 1863), pp. 293-95; *Bartholomaei de Cotton ... Historia Anglicana*, ed. H.R. Luard, Rolls Series (London, 1859), pp. 304-6), commentators have unhesitatingly taken the description literally and understood it to mean 'a fresh / newly tanned ox-hide'. This, however, should in turn have raised another question: why would anyone go to the expense of purchasing a newly tanned piece of leather on which to drag a miserable traitor through the streets in an act of ritual public humiliation?

When Turberville, at the start of his last journey, was brought from the Tower, he was described as riding 'a small, shabby saddle-horse (*un povere hakeney*) and dressed in a cheap striped cloth coat (*une cote de raye*). He was wearing plain footwear (*blanche chauces*) and had a simple cap (*une hovel*) on his head. His feet had been tied together under the horse's belly, and he was holding his bound hands out in front of him. Round him rode an execution team (*turmenturs*) of six men dressed in Devil costumes (*a la furme del Deble atireez*). One of these kept hold of the bridle (*soen freyn*) of the traitor's horse, and the hangman himself held the halter (*sa chevestre*) with which it was also equipped.'

How a sheet of freshly tanned leather could be thought appropriate in such a squalid and degrading setting is not easy to imagine. One might, indeed, have expected precisely the opposite, namely a cheap, inferior and disposable shroud suitable for dragging a traitor to his ignominious death. And this must clearly be the meaning of *un quir de bof fres* in the above passage, understanding *fres* in the sense of 'untanned ox-hide', in other words 'rawhide'. Corroboration of this interpretation comes from Latin forms such as *coriis bovinis friscis*, glossed '(of hide) untreated, raw' in *DMLBS* s.v. *friscus*, and Latham's gloss 'raw, untanned' in *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, p. 201b. This sense appears to be lacking in the standard Medieval French dictionaries (and in *FEW*), and is to be added.

By the same token, the *blanche chauces* which Turberville is described as being dressed in are probably 'plain, undyed' rather than 'white'. Cf. *AND* s.v. *cuir blanc*: 'leather which is left in its original colour'; Latham *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, p. 51b: *blanco* 'white-taw (leather)'; *DMLBS* s.v. *corium* 1c: *coria recentia et pannos crudos*.

Ian Short, May 2024