

King Robert as the Illiterate Fool in *Robert of Cisyle*

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I. Introduction

Presumably composed no later than 1375 when the earliest extant manuscript Trinity College D. 57 is dated (Hornstein 1963, 453–54 n. 1, Hornstein 1967, 171–72), *Robert of Cisyle* is a romance about the eponymous proud Sicilian king who, after deriding the Lucan gospel that God may put down the mighty and exalt the humble, finds himself deposed and forcibly transformed into the court fool by an angel usurper until he fully repents and sheds his excessive pride. The unusually successful transmission history of this anonymous short poem, of which there were ten Middle English analogues produced over a span of 125 years from 1375 to 1500, suggests that the poem may have seized a large readership

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in the late Middle Ages and perhaps through the early modern period, as the existence of a now-lost ballad version of *Robert* in a printed form sometime in 1569–70 may attest (Hornstein 1963, 453–54 n. 1, Hornstein 1967, 171–72, Mehl 125, Olsen 1994, 71–72 & n. 1, Simons 103–104). Most modern critics of the Middle English *Robert* seem to more or less concur with the idea that this romance is, in French and Hale’s terms, “a pious legend, told to edify rather than to amuse” (933). Indeed, the heading of *Robert* in Bodleian 3938, which is commonly known as the “Vernon manuscript”—“Her is Kyng Robert of Cisyle. / Hou pride dude him begyle”—(Scase 300r), appears to encapsulate the exemplary drama of Robert’s downfall and his recuperation.

Despite the poem’s relative “brevity and simplicity” (Baker 26), the poet of *Robert* deftly balances the poem’s overt and persistent didactic impetus with “a series of quite dramatic scenes” that is narrated “with evident gusto” and prevents the story from being “reduced to a bare outline,” say, of some genuine homilies (Mehl 125). Not only this, according to “the modern authority” on *Robert* (Olsen 1994, 74) Lillian Herlands Hornstein, “[divergent] themes from folklore, Biblical commentary, and history” (1964, 13) that this romance appears to harbor also merit scholarly discussions. Two of the main interests that I would like to explore in this paper revolve around such biblical and historical elements that this romance seems to display. My first concern is with the significance of the confrontational moment between Robert and the unnamed clerk in regard to the Latin *deposuit potentes* lines. My second interest, in connection with this first one, lies in speculating upon the reactions of the Ricardian and post-Ricardian English audiences towards the rendering of Robert as illiterate and his drastic descent to the level of the court fool and of animals. One underlying premise for this paper is that although the major story is set in Sicily and Rome with no definite indication of time, Robert,

who features as a young, prideful, volatile, and illiterate king, becoming deposed, albeit temporarily, may have been felt very closely, though in different sentiments and veins, by the English audiences, who had experienced or could remember the social and dynastic turmoil that England had had to see, surely including the 1381 Rising and the deposition of Richard II in 1399. This cultural and affective tie that *Robert* potentially built with the medieval English readership could be one viable explanation of the high popularity that the romance is claimed to have enjoyed.

II. Robert and the *Deposuit potentes*

Brother of the Pope and the Emperor, the prideful king Robert thinks that nobody in the world can be as powerful as he is. Even at the vesper service in church on Saint John's Night, his thoughts are more in the world's honor than in Christ. Unable to comprehend the Latin verse of the *Magnificat*, he asks a nearby clerk to translate it. The following passage taken from the Vernon manuscript edited by Walter Hoyt French and Charles Hale provides a full view of this crucial incident that transforms the life of Robert forever:

In Magnificat he herde a vers;
 He made a clerk hit him rehers
 In language of his owne tonge;
 In Latyn he nuste what heo songe.
 Þe vers was þis, I telle þe:
 "Deposuit potentes de sede,
 Et exaltauit humiles."
 Þis was þe vers, wiþouten les.

Þe clerk seide anon riht,
 “Sire, such is Godes miht
 Þat he may make heyȝe lowe
 And lowe heiȝe, in luytel þrowe;
 God may do, wiþouten lyȝe,
 His wil, in twynklyng of an eiȝe.”
 Þe Kyng seide, wiþ herte vnstable,
 “Al ȝor song is fals and fable:
 What mon haþ such pouwer?
 I am flour of chialrye;
 Myn enemys i may distruye;
 No mon lyueþ in no londe
 Þat me may wiþstonde;
 Þen is þis a song of nouht!” (ll.35–57)¹⁾

These twenty-two lines, which capture the dissonant air between Robert and a daring clerk over the interpretation of the verse from the *Magnificat*, evoke multiple interesting points. The *Magnificat* comes in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke (1:46–55) and is a psalm sung by Mary when she, who has just conceived Christ through the Holy Spirit, is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth who has also become miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. This song of Mary is normally used in the vesper service (French and Hale 934) and, given its strong association to the mother of the Baptist, is perhaps even more suitable for the Night of John the Baptist that Robert himself is attending. The Latin verse “Deposuit potentes de sede, Et exaltauit humiles” (Luke 1: 52) is usually translated as “He [God] hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree” (French and Hale 934). Thus, this clerk’s translation—“he [God] may make heyȝe lowe / And lowe heiȝe” (ll.40–41)—may not be a

1) All quotations are from the edition of the Vernon Manuscript in French and Hale, eds., *Middle English Metrical Romance*, 933–46.

verbatim rendering, but it should still serve the main thrust of the verse.

Yet what is at stake is less the accuracy of the clerk's translation than his patronizing, impudent manner of presenting his translation of the verse that may itself sound "so politically provocative" (Baker 28). Though he does not explicitly link the "hey3e" and the king, it is not hard to sense the clerk's conflation of the two in his "liberal gloss" (Baker 31). By emphasizing the power and swiftness of the heavenly king in pulling down the high to the bottom, the clerk throws a warning to the earthly king Robert, who has openly regarded himself as the mightiest and the highest. Robert does not fail to perceive this barely diluted admonishment from the clerk.

If the king's uncontrolled pride becomes the source and target of the clerk's presumptuous interpretative undertaking, his illiteracy in Latin that is unambiguously stated in line 38—"In Latyn he nuste what heo songe" — necessitates the aid of the clerk. In other words, the ultimate *raison d'être* of the clerk comes from the fact that Robert is illiterate in Latin, *ipso facto* making him need someone who knows Latin and can translate the Marian song in "his owne tonge" (1.37). This particular textual deployment does not seem to be the English poet's own creation, insofar as at least three earlier continental analogues — the early thirteenth-century German *Der Nackte Konig*, the late thirteenth-century German *Der Nackte Kaiser* by Herrand von Wildonie, and the early fourteenth-century French *Li Dis Dou Magnificat* by Jean de Condé (Baker 38–40) — contain the parallel moment where the king or emperor is assisted by a translator for the *deposuit potentes*. The translator that the German or French Robert hires is "a scribe" or "a priest" that is virtually in the same coterie of occupation as the "clerk" in the Middle English *Robert*. In the medieval sense, a "clerk" means primarily an ecclesiastic and also a scholar or scribe who is educated in Latin (*MED*).² The fact that the clerk in *Robert* has been

listening to the evensong in the church when the king demands him as a translator helps to propose that he could be one member of the clergy who offers the nightly service for the king. The common image that a “scribe,” “priest,” and “clerk” evokes is a “clerkly” person who is educated in the letters of Latin, thus distinguished from the layperson who, like the king himself, can have vernacularity but no knowledge about the language of the clerk.

Apparently, almost all ten lines of the passage quoted above that deal with the matter of the king’s illiteracy and his conflict with the clerk could be deemed as accessories, in that the main purpose of the *deposuit potentes* for bearing witness to the king’s limitless pride can still be served without making him illiterate and without installing the conflict between him and the clerk. The poet could simply drop these details from the unknown source(s) (Hornstein 1967, 172), and go directly to the king’s exclamation of disbelief in the authority of the Marian song that begins in line 50 and continues until line 57. Of course, this alternative writing would have to proceed on condition that the king must grasp the Latin for himself, whereby the clerk’s intervention will be forestalled. However, the English redactor does not take this simpler path that may present the didactic appeal of the romance in a more condensed manner; instead, he takes pains to elaborate on the ostensibly inessential elements, one salient function of which is to inscribe the king’s illiteracy in the reader’s mind. Then, why does it matter to the English poet, perhaps as to the poets of the three continental analogues, that the king has to remain a layman who is blind and deaf to the language of the clerk?

2) “1. (a) A member of the clergy (as distinguished from the laity), an ecclesiastic, cleric”; “2. (a) One who is educated: a learned person, scholar, master (of some subject); (b) a man of letters, writer, author”; and “3. (a) Secretary, amanuensis, recorder; also, an official in charge of records and accounts”(“Clerk,” MED).

One can find an answer to this question from the point that on the whole this romance is imbued with strong “clerkly” inclination that may be characterized as scriptural, scribal, edifying, prescriptive, and Latinate, among others (Baker 41, Olsen 1994, 77–79). More than anything, the didactic and pious ambition that props and propels the entire poem should be one telling caliber of the clerkly aptitude. The line unrelentingly drawn between Robert and the clerk, namely, between illiterate and literate, must be another defining illustration of the clerkly aspiration of the text. Let’s spare a moment to consider what it may have meant to be literate or illiterate in the later medieval period when the Middle English *Robert* and its analogues were in circulation. *Litteratus* meaning ‘literate’ originally described a person with *scientia litterarum*, meaning ‘knowledge of letters’ (Clanchy 355). Between A.D.500 and 1000 when Christianity expanded as more barbarians converted to it, while *laos* meaning the ‘people’ or crowd, *clerici* meaning clergymen began to be associated with *litterati*, which well reflects the historical fact that most Latinists were clergy (Clanchy 355). By the twelfth century *clericus* became synonymous with *litteratus*, and *laicus* (‘layman’) with *illitteratus*. Other Latin words often used interchangeably with *illitteratus* are *rusticus* and *idioticus* (Stock 26–29, Gellrich 153). Modern medievalists such as Michael T. Clanchy, Brian Stock, and Jesse M. Gellrich, who have studied the written and oral cultures of the Middle Ages, claim that literate or *litteratus* in the medieval period, especially from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, normally meant a person who “could read, write, and perhaps also speak Latin” (Stock 27, Gellrich 153, Clanchy 354–69). Despite the existence of “the medieval axiom that laymen are illiterate” and “clergy are literate” (Clanchy 355), not all monks or priests in reality had high knowledge in Latin, and in such case, they were *laici et illitterati*. In the same vein, some non-churchmen were highly erudite in Latin; in this case, even if

they were not clergymen, they were *clerici et litterati* (Clanchy 358–59). According to these accounts, though king he may be, Robert in our romance is certainly *laicus, illitteratus, rusticus, and idioticus*, because the poet makes it clear that Robert does not understand Latin. Whether this featuring of the king as an illiterate is historically correct or not is another matter.

The Latinate propensity of the clerkly English redactor is succinctly captured in the way that the *deposuit potentes* verse is grafted into the English lines in the quoted passage. Alexandra H. Olsen (1994, 78) discusses this interweaving process meticulously. In an attempt to rhyme with the Latin word “sede” meaning seat (l.40), the meaningless expression “i telle þe”(l.39) is inserted. In addition, in order to rhyme with “humiles” meaning humble (l.41), the poet uses another empty phrase “wipouten les” (l.42) and repeats it a few lines after (l.47). It is, as Olsen points out, clear that the poet considers it important to weave the Latin into the English lines, to the point that he ventures to create the empty tags and repetition in this short poem, and in so doing he compromises the “narrative sense” of this incident that plays presumably the most important crisis of the romance (78).

The king’s outburst of rage at the clerk after listening to his provocative interpretation has been read primarily as his attack on the authority of the gospel and God by extension. This line of reading can indeed be supported by Robert’s long Holy Thursday repentance, where he admits that he has not believed in God—“Lord, I leeued not on þe”(l.351). Yet his anger can also be taken as a sign of his distrust, immediately in the authenticity of the clerk’s interpretation (Baker 38) and broadly in the written, Latinate culture that the clerk represents. Relying on C. Stephen Jaeger’s claim, Olsen notes that “Clerical authors argue against the *fabulae* of oral traditional poetry and commend the salutary effects of their own trustful

historical material derived from written tradition” (78–79). However, interestingly enough, Robert brands the Scriptural verse that should be representing the trustful written tradition as “fals and fable,” namely, a false lie (l.50). The king’s labeling of the *deposuit potentes* lines as a falsehood can be seen as double-edged. On one hand, he may not simply accept the revolutionary message that the gospel preaches; on the other hand, as an illiterate, he may not fully trust the literate culture that the clerk seems to liberally and tactically take advantage of for his own purpose. Hence, when he repents on Holy Thursday, admitting that “Holy writ I hedde in dispyt; / For þat is reued my delyt” (ll.353–54), it can be inferred that Robert acknowledges not only his lack of faith in the sacred words but also his displeasure with the clerkly rhetoric in which the gospel was glossed and represented.

III. Robert as the Fool and as the Companion of Animals

My preceding question about the significance of Robert’s illiteracy can be further pursued in light of the king’s subsequent plunge to the level of the court fool and of animals, and could also be helpful in imagining the reactions of Ricardian and post-Ricardian readers to such an ignoble descent of the king. I have noted above that literacy during the later Middle Ages normally meant the ability to read, write, and speak in Latin. This implies that Robert, who does not know Latin, has no literacy, even though he has the “language of his owne tonge” (l. 37). One may wonder what socio-cultural implications and impacts this discourse of literacy/illiteracy may have yielded in the territory of medieval intelligence. The “most injurious consequence of medieval literacy,”

according to Brian Stock, was “the notion that literacy [was] identical with rationality” and with “rational attitudes” (31). If literacy is taken the same as rationality and rational attitudes, illiteracy naturally becomes synonymous with irrationality and irrational demeanors. Following this analogy, the fact that Robert has no literacy is inevitably led to the corollary that he has no rationality, that he is an irrational creature. The dramatic turn of fortune that relentlessly hurls Robert down to the bottom of the hierarchy of society and of “creation” (Foster 92) after the disquieting vesper service fits surprisingly well into this supposition.

The two most commonly used terms to identify Robert after the reversal of his fortune are “wood” or “mad” (l. 85, l. 91, l.179, l. 303) and “fool.” “Fool,” in particular, is used more than twenty times to define him and remind him of his “underlyng” (l.272 & l.402) status with “non oper dignité”(l.391). His new companions or attendants are presented to him with animals such as an ape and dogs. These words and images dub the pauper Robert with the character of madness, stupidity, simple-mindedness, bestiality, and irrationality (Foster 92, Baker 30, Hamilton 176). One may here amply argue that Robert’s irrationality, which his illiteracy has already nuanced, is embodied into the irrationality of a madman, the fool, and animals. Finding himself deserted all alone at the church after being awoken from his nap, Robert can no longer be recognized as king by his subjects. Instead, he is taken first as a “wood” man by the church sexton (l.86, l.91) and later as a “fool” by the porter of his own court (l.112), because he continues to announce himself as the king, while the angel has replaced him at court. He even exchanges bloody blows with the porter, is dumped into a puddle, and is finally dragged by the same man who calls Robert a rascal (“gadelyng,” l. 134) before the angel-king (l.130). Robert’s self-declaration of lawful kingship and brotherhood with the Pope and the Emperor is ruthlessly dismissed as the nonsense of a madman, and

causes him to be made the court fool by the substitute king. Despite Robert's loud resistance by crying and making noise (ll.174), his hair is shaved as a mark of his new position as the king's fool, and the poet captures this humiliating ceremony very vividly: "Al around, lich a frère, / An honde-brede boue eiþer ere, / And on his croune make a crois" (ll. 171-73).

Robert's alleged natural foolishness and irrationality appears to accord him the fool position. Hence, of the two general categories that demarcate fools in the medieval and early modern periods, "between the natural and the artificial," between "those who were regarded as fools 'by nature' and those who pretended folly to fulfill a professional, comedic role," Robert must be considered to be the natural or "innocent" fool (Southworth, ch.1). Historian John Southworth, who has studied fools and jesters in the English court during the medieval and Renaissance periods, notes that being excluded from the feudal hierarchy, fools "existed in a social limbo," and even in their "natural habitat of the court," they "remained apart, almost as if [they] belonged to another species," sitting at "a separate table," and being "alone in [their] separation" (ch.1).

Robert, in our romance, does not seem to be all alone, in that he has an ape and dogs for his attendants. The substitute king gives Robert an ape for his advisor, dressing him identically with the ape (ll.157-58). He also appoints hounds as Robert's food testers, with whom he will have to contend for food and eat on the ground, like dogs (ll.167). However, this animalistic advisorship and companionship granted to Robert bespeaks itself that not only is he excluded from the hierarchy of the court and medieval society, he is also cast out of the borders of mankind. As a consequence, he has to occupy a much lower place than humanity does on the chain of being, where irrational and bestial creatures, like monkeys and dogs, may belong. In other words, Robert's "relationship to animals, apes, and dogs

establishes a new position for him in the hierarchy of creation” (Foster 92). Such a shameful plunge of Robert to the level of foolishness, irrationality and bestiality will not be remedied until his thorough compunction and conversion about his “trespass” (l.308) is fulfilled on Holy Thursday. The episode of King Nebuchadnezzar (ll.325–32), to whom Robert likens himself in the beginning of his long repentance, seems to be the poet’s deliberate interpolation to reinforce the motif of the haughty prince who is stricken with the enforced exile to insanity and beastly deportment (Baker 30). In the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, Nebuchadnezzar is king of the Babylonians (605–562 B.C.) who, on account of singing his own praises, as foretold in the form of the divine warning through Daniel, loses his mind, is “cast out from among men,” “dwell[s] with wild beasts,” and “eat[s grass] like an ox” for seven years, until “his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle, and his nails like the claws of a bird” (Daniel 4: 22–30). Compared with the detailed Scriptural description of the transformation of Nebuchadnezzar, except for the doubled length of the Babylonian king’s exile, Robert’s report of the king’s deserted life with “rootes, gras, and euel fare [food]” (ll.328) sounds less harsh, in that the king’s loss of wit, his habitation with beasts, and his neglected, beastly appearance are all dropped. Nonetheless, Robert’s overt reference to this popular biblical king, whose insanity and wild behaviors often inspired medieval English writers including John Gower (Peck 159–87), perhaps fulfills its purpose to imprint one last time Robert’s irrationality that is insinuated by his illiteracy in Latin and transferred into the foolishness and madness of the fool and the bestiality of apes and dogs.

IV. Robert, Richard II, and the Rising of 1381.

When one pictures the medieval readership and the popularity of the Middle English *Robert*, one cannot avoid being reminded that this romance “was in circulation during the tumultuous final decades of the Ricardian period and throughout the dynastic turbulence of the fifteenth century” (Baker 28). In the remainder of this paper, I would like to speculate upon the reactions of the Ricardian and post-Ricardian readers towards the Middle English *Robert*. In this, as Joan Baker similarly clarifies (29), I do not argue that such major political incidents as the 1381 Rising and the 1399 deposition of Richard II that occurred in the Ricardian era constitute the historical background for the composition of the poem. It would be undeniable anachronism to do so, in that this romance was already being compiled in manuscript no later than 1375. Instead, I would propose that the literary and historical accounts of the late fourteenth-century political incidents may help us to imagine how the English audiences in the late fourteenth and fifteenth-century periods may have savored *Robert*, especially in light of some textual deployments that are potentially provocative, such as the king’s plummet and redemption done in “unusual poignancy” (Hornsten 1967, 172) and liberalism.

Much readily, Robert’s handsome look and youth (1.4), his volatile temperament revealed by his swearing at and smiting of the sexton and the porter who do not recognize him, his alleged madness, and most obviously his usurpation allude to Richard II. Richard is generally acknowledged by historians to have had “youthful weakness” and the “preferment of young advisers” as well as “outstanding personal appearance” which Shakespeare did not fail to satirize in his play (Aston 303–04). Also, Richard’s 1397 arrests of Gloucester, Arundel, and Warwick, and his confiscation of their property, probably as vengeance for their execution of his men in 1388,

were usually taken as the evidence of his “emotional immaturity,” or “even schizophrenia and madness” (Gellrich 185). John the Baptist, allusively present—firstly in the Marian song whose audience in the gospel is Elizabeth pregnant with the saint and then in the evensong service that is offered to celebrate the Baptist which Robert himself is attending, seems to act as an interface between Robert and Richard too, given the fact that Robert is known to have “officially adopted the Baptist as his patron saint” (Baker 37).

Indeed, Robert’s deposition is temporary and is to be rectified in due course when he repents, while Richard lost the throne permanently and was never given the second chance to regain it because Henry Bolingbroke preempted such chance by assassinating the deposed Richard. This association of Robert and Richard may have engendered different responses from the late medieval and early modern English audiences. If, like such fifteenth—and sixteenth—century reformist writers as William Tyndale and John Foxe, they thought of the accession of Henry Bolingbroke to the throne as “a lamentable turning—point which marked the inception of bloodshed and disorder” (Aston 290), then they probably felt sympathetic with the disgraced Robert and hence much relieved when Robert is restored to his throne. However, if they were like the Lancastrians and their allies who were convinced that it was Richard and his ministers themselves who bought their own tragic denouements, as it is all Robert’s fault in the romance, then they may have taken much less pity on the humiliated and usurped Robert and perhaps they even felt that justice had been served as in reality, albeit temporarily in the poem.

It sounds oxymoronic that the “politically disenfranchised” (Baker 36) Robert in the romance alludes not only to Richard but also to the crowd who were involved in the Rising of 1381, whose desires the king failed to address properly. The affinity between Robert and the insurgents of the

riot becomes even more striking, if their common, linguistically disenfranchised conditions are counted. Robert's illiteracy in Latin and the entailing implications of irrationality, madness, and bestiality very closely overlap with the "mindless and bestial" imagery (Crane 208) of the 1381 *rustici*³ that the historical and literary accounts of the incident register.

The Rising of 1381 that broke out four years after Richard had succeeded to the throne was not merely the act of "peasants"; more accurately speaking, it was "a plebeian affair" that included a "great majority [of] peasants, tenant farmers, and serfs, but also a certain number of townspeople, such as members of the craft guilds, laborers, poor clergy, clerks, and even some members of the lesser gentry" (Gellrich 155). The "most significant fact about the politics of the rebel speeches is that they were rendered in a language that the masses could understand, without the mediation of written documents or translations from another tongue" (Gellrich 157). Indeed, this does not mean that all the participants were *illitterati* who torched documents out of "a revenge" or "an exorcism" against "a literacy that was threatening because alien and mysterious" (Justice 41 & 51). Obviously, such principal leaders of the Rising as the "mad priest" John Ball were *litterati* whose Latinity was good enough to twist its conventions (Gellrich 155). Also, as historians of the insurgent literature such as Steven Justice and Jesse M. Gellrich hold, the rebels did know the value and power of the written documents. By destroying the documents selectively and tactically, they wanted to reclaim their voice that the documents had denied to stand for (Gellrich 162), and they perhaps intended to recreate the documentary culture that was once written and therefore could be rewritten, this time, on their behalf (Justice

3) The word *rustici* (*rusticus*) that primarily meant "laymen" who did not know Latin in the later Middle Ages was also used by such chroniclers as Thomas Walsingham to refer to those who participated in the 1381 rebellion. See Gellrich 153–54 & note 4 of this paper.

48–51).

Nevertheless, the fact itself cannot be contradicted that the few literate leaders of the rebellion were appealing to “the vast illiteracy” or “at best, semiliteracy” of “their audiences, who had lived in an oral world almost completely uneducated in the bookish history” (Gellrich 157). Namely, vernacularity, or more accurately vernacular orality, defined the principal discourse of the insurgents. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the chroniclers of the Rising, such as Thomas Walsingham and the anonymous author of the *Anonimale Chronicle*, express their antagonism quite forthrightly against the rebels who threatened the high written culture where the writers themselves belonged and represented, as the clerk does in *Robert*. They dismissed the insurgents’ dangerous vernacularity, which they believed were expressed through the acts of burning documents and lynching high-ranked clerics, as the senseless cacophonies of irrational, devilish beasts. A monk from the scriptorium of St. Albans which was in his charge until death, Walsingham registers the heated voices of the crowd who were witnessing the beheading of Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, whom they had declared to be one of their chief enemies: “no words were uttered during the horrific noise; their throats resounded with the bleatings of sheep, or to be more precise, with the devilish voices of peacocks” (*Historia Anglicana 1: 460*, qtd. in Gellrich 163, Crane 209). To Walsingham, such senseless, dangerous, and bestial rebels were no less than the illiterates or *rustici*⁴⁾ who took the literate culture and

4) Jesse M. Gellrich traces the history of the semantic adaptation of the word *rusticus(rustici)* from Roman antiquity to the later Middle Ages: “*rusticus* dates from early in Roman antiquity as a commonplace for characterizing the archaic speech habits, mannerisms, and vocabulary of people who live in the country. Cicero and Quintilian so use the term to derogate a discourse that lacks the politeness and refinement of individuals familiar with *urbanitas* (‘city life’)... In later medieval Latin, the term is regularly used in opposition to *litteratus* as a designation of someone whose speech does not obey grammatical principles and who has no ability to read simple Latin. *Rusticus*, accordingly, appears in

practitioners as their enemy: “It was dangerous to be known as a clerk, but even more dangerous if an inkpot should be discovered near one’s elbow; for such people rarely or never escaped from the hands of the *rustics*” (*Historia Anglicana* 2:9, qtd. in Gellrich 163, *italics original* & Justice 18). Literary accounts of the insurgents do not seem to be much different from these historical accounts. For instance, in *Vox Clamantis*, John Gower envisions the morally degenerate rebellion leader and his mindless followers as “wild animals” and “monsters” (Crane 208). He likens the leader making a “morally twisted speech”⁵⁾ to the crowd to a “jackdaw [a crow-like bird] well-trained in the art of speaking” (Crane 208). Instigated by his crooked address, the rebels “cried over and over in the great voices of monsters and in various ways made a variety of noises”(Gower, qtd. in Crane 208).

Indeed, despite large differences in social standing between the two parties, it is hard to resist identifying the Robert who is disenfranchised both politically and discursively with the participants of the 1381 Rising. Robert is an insurgent, in the sense that he is an illiterate or *rusticus* whose vernacularity is subdued away by the clerk’s condescending gloss of

conjunction with *laicus* (‘layperson’) to specify an individual who is *illiteratus*, in contrast to a *cler[i]cus* (‘clerk), who could read, write, and perhaps even speak Latin. So *rusticus* has linguistic, not just agricultural, signification with the reference to the rebels”(153). Including the following quotation, Walsingham in his *Historia Anglicana* often uses *rustici* (“rustics”) to refer to rebels of the 1381 riot, especially when they destroyed documents and executed those who were responsible for preserving the written records: “This exclamation pleased the rustics immensely, and once they were incited to even greater extremes, they shouted that all court rolls and old records be given to the flames, so that once the memory of ancient things had been destroyed, the lords could have no power to vindicate any law at all over them thereafter” (Gellrich 154).

- 5) “O miserable servile race, whom the world has subjected for a long time by its law, now behold, the day has come when the serfs will triumph and force the freemen to leave their lands. May all honor cease, may justice perish, and may ho virtue that existed heretofore persist any longer on earth” (Gower, qtd. in Crane 208).

the Latin gospel, and that his oral protest is dismissed as the nonsense of a simple-minded fool whose rationality is as low and base as that of dogs and apes. Imagining the medieval and early modern readership of *Robert* as such seems to be doomed to end as an unpromising undertaking, in that there will be no way to know the exact reception history of the Middle English *Robert*, and hence many times we will have to rely on our own conjectures and impressions in elaborating on the relation of the romance and its readership. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the romance suggests potential ways of reading itself. Among others, the plummet and restoration of the haughty Robert may have made *Robert* read as a moral drama, while the romance's affinity to the Ricardian time may have made it work as a political memoir.

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Abstract

King Robert as the Illiterate Fool in *Robert of Cisyle*

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This paper is about *Robert of Cisyle*, a late fourteenth-century English romance wherein the eponymous proud Sicilian king who, after deriding the Latin *Magnificat* verse that God may put down the mighty and exalt the humble, finds himself deposed and forcibly transformed into the court fool by an angel usurper until he fully repents and sheds his excessive pride. The first of the main interests that I would like to explore in this paper is with the significance of the confrontational moment between Robert and the unnamed clerk in regard to translating the Latin *deposuit potentes* lines of the Lucan *Magnificat* into the vernacular tongue of the king. The deliberate textual deployment where Robert is depicted to have no literacy in Latin works to propose that he has no rationality, unlike the Latinate translator-clerk, and he is an irrational creature like dogs and apes by whom he will be assisted after his downfall. My second interest, in deep connection with this first one, lies in imagining the reactions of the Ricardian and post-Ricardian English audiences towards the rendering of Robert as illiterate and his drastic descent to the level of the court fool and of animals. Although the major story is set in Sicily and Rome with no definite indication of time, Robert, who features as a young, prideful, volatile, and illiterate king, becoming deposed, albeit temporarily, may have been felt very closely, though in different sentiments and veins, by the English audiences, who had experienced or could remember the social and dynastic turmoil that England had had to see, surely including the 1381

Rising and the deposition of Richard II in 1399. This cultural and affective tie that *Robert* potentially built with the medieval English readership could be one viable explanation of the high popularity that the romance is believed to have enjoyed.

Key Words: *Robert of Cisyle*, literacy/illiteracy, vernacularity, insurgents, fool

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