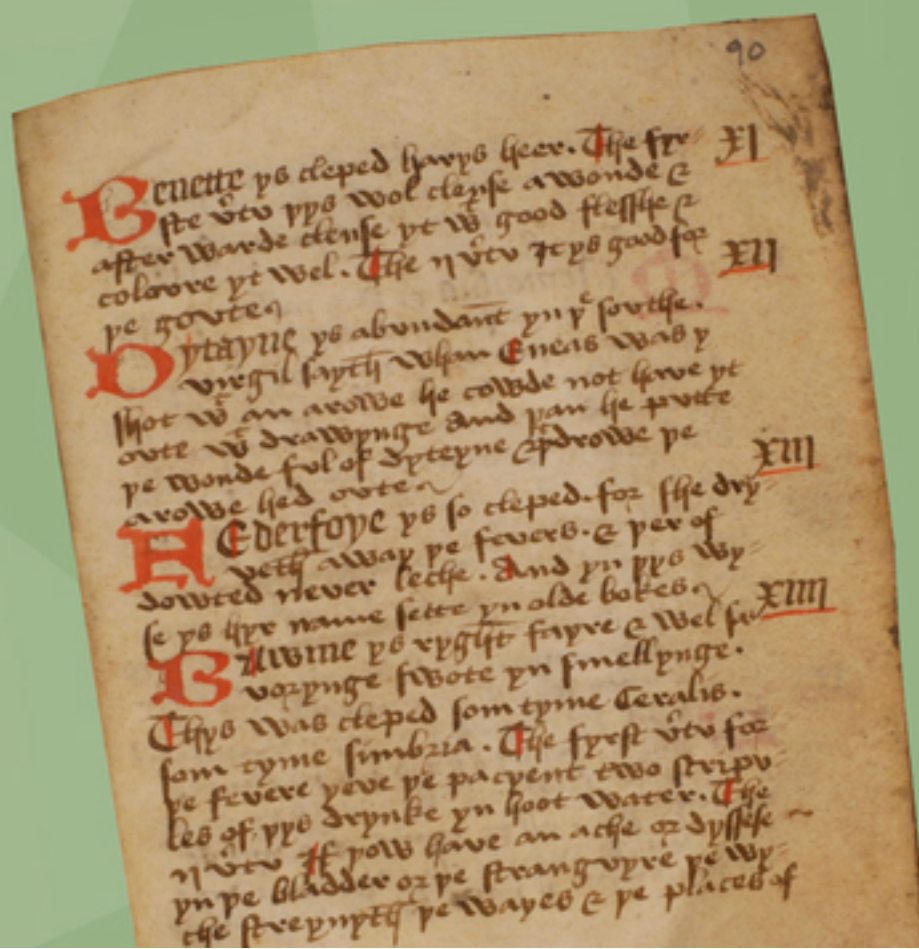


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The Middle English Version of *De Viribus Herbarum* (GUL MS Hunter 497, ff. 1r-92r)

Edition and Philological Study



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The Middle English Version of *De Viribus Herbarum* (GUL MS Hunter 497, ff. 1r-92r)

This welcome new edition of materials from Glasgow University Library MS Hunter 497 (V. 7. 24) makes available for the first time the only Middle English version of the Latin verse *De viribus herbarum* by Macer Floridus not previously edited by modern scholars. It is a pleasure to be able to read the text in an accessible scholarly format, supported by full notes and glossary and a detailed and informative introduction. Such works of practical guidance have recently been receiving much welcome scholarly attention, and the secondary resources for their study have developed very significantly in the last thirty years, thanks to the work of scholars such as Linda Ehrsam Voigts, Patricia Deery Kurtz, Peter Murray Jones and George R. Keiser. But, no matter how magisterial the overview, and no matter how comprehensive the calendaring and finding aids, there is no substitute for the experience of sitting down and reading through these materials.

As is typical of the English vernacular translations of practical works in this period, the hexameter verse is translated into serviceable, if often necessarily formulaic prose. The efflorescence of such translations in the last quarter of the fourteenth century and throughout the fifteenth, culminating in the appearance of many similar texts from the early printing houses, is tribute to the growing pragmatic literacy of lay readers and book owners, as well as the ongoing need for religious and educational institutions to be able to make practical and local provision for the needs of their members. The rapidly expanding readership for vernacular works of this kind was often locally and idiolectally inflected, and works of particular utility and popular appeal were often translated on several occasions, independently, in geographically diverse locations, and in ways that reflect the particular needs or interests of the target audiences. In religious writing, for example, no fewer than seven different independent vernacular translations were made of Richard Rolle's useful compendium of spiritual guidance, the *Emendatio vitae*, originally targeted at a male monastic readership but later made extensively available for mixed lay and religious audiences. Similarly, it is useful to have a complete array of the now more than a dozen known Macer Floridus translations available for scholarly perusal, comparison, and analysis. Frequent translation not only suggests the utility that such texts were felt to have in a variety of social, institutional and domestic contexts, but also reminds us that, even in the face of a rapidly expanding lay market for vernacular books, much book produc-

tion was local, occasional, amateur, and pragmatic. Gentry and clergy, householders and scholars, medics and manciples, monks and merchants, all needed and wanted to be able to consult herbals and to apply their conventional and proverbial wisdom to the needs of their clients, customers, and colleagues. Although the medieval provenance of Hunter 497 cannot be ascertained, dialectally the editors locate it in the south of the county of Essex, close to the metropolitan centres of London and Westminster, with their burgeoning mercantile and professional readerships and their lively institutional life, and also home to many significant religious foundations. The Macer Herbal is only one of a series of popular herbal taxonomies, but its separate translation on many occasions suggests both its penetration into the marketplace, and its appeal and efficacy as a compendium of lore. It is striking that the *Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues* to date records sixteen copies of the Latin Macer Floridus in the catalogues and *registra* of institutional collections so far published, and only three of a vernacular version, all three at Syon Abbey, the Birgittine double house founded by Henry V in 1415, one of the last major monastic foundations of the English Middle Ages, and itself a notable centre for vernacular translation and the transmission of vernacular materials.