WHERE ART THOU?

In translating a late 14th century poem from Dutch I happened to have chosen to use 'thou' as a translation of the person being addressed in the poem. I received a comment from someone whose opinion I greatly respect regarding my translation work: 'I would prefer *you* to *thou*. Thou art not translating into 14th century English, nor 17th.'
I have heard this argument before. And it raises an issue most poetry translators are unwilling to discuss, or even flatly reject as being important or relevant. 'Write in good, modern English when translating old poetry' is what is advised.

Should I ignore the time dimension when translating poetry? Should I say: If you want it in the language of the time when it was written, go to the original? Should my 'good, modern English' translation be as if the poem had been written yesterday? It wasn't, and to pretend otherwise is to dodge the issue.

I agree that translating into 14th century, or 17th century English is presumptuous, undesirable and impossible. But there is no getting round the problem here. To translate this poem into 'good, modern' English deprives it of its very nerve. For the language and what is being expressed, and how this is being expressed are inextricably intertwined. The poem in question is a lament at the loss of a beloved (sic!). And the couching of that loss belongs to a specific age and culture. And the poem has formal constraints (a strict rhyme scheme, for example) that do not synchronise naturally with most modern poetry.

A poem translation should convey the feeling of reading the original poem, not just the content or certain formal constraints. Choice of vocabulary, stylistic features, sensitivity to rhythm and prosody are part and parcel of the overall impression a poem creates. It is possible to 'suggest' this in a translation without becoming 'oldy-worldy', but it is extremely difficult. You must try to convey the time dimension by suggesting it, not laying it on with a trowel.

Comparisons with 'original instrument performances' of older music do not quite work, since we lack the semantic dimension here, but to insist on playing Beethoven with vast orchestras of 'good, modern' instruments is very unlike listening to a performance that tries to capture what the music actually sounded like when first performed.

I am not denying the validity of a translation of an early poem that ignores the time dimension. But I do claim that it will always lack something, and that what it lacks is important. I do not want to do a Pierre Menard on originals, but I am seeking a way of being four-dimensional in the poetry I translate.

RONDEEL

Egidius, waer bestu bleven?
Mi lanct na di, gheselle mijn.
Du coors de doot, du liets mi tleven.

Dat was gheselscap goet ende fijn,
Het sceen teen moeste ghestorven sijn.
Nu bestu in den troon verheven

Claerre dan der zonnen schijn,
Alle vruecht es di ghegheven.

Egidius, waer bestu bleven?
Mi lanct na di, gheselle mijn.
Du coors de doot, du liets mi tleven.

Nu bidt vor mi: ic moet noch sneven
Ende in de weerelt lijden pijn.
Verware mijn stede di beneven:
Ic moet noch zinghen een liedekijn.
Nochtan moet emmer ghestorven sijn.

Egidius, waer bestu bleven?
Mi lanct na di, gheselle mijn.
Du coors de doot, du liets mi tleven.

Rondel

Egidius, where shall I find thee?
I long for thee, dear friend of mine.
Thou'st suffered death, to life consigned me.

Sweet company we had and fine,
Yet one must die and the other pine.
Now at the throne mayst thou enshrined be,
There as a brightest sun to shine,
With bliss that's unalloyed assigned thee.

Egidius, where shall I find thee?
I long for thee, dear friend of mine.
Thou'st suffered death, to life consigned me.

Now pray for me: thy death's behind thee,
I to this harsh world must resign.
Keep my place by thee safe, I mind thee:
I still must sing my song's each line.
Yet unto death all lives incline.

Egidius, where shall I find thee?
I long for thee, dear friend of mine.
Thou'st suffered death, to life consigned me.