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Introduction

Medieval literature is characterised by the juxtaposition and interaction of Latin and the vernacular languages. Usually, Latin texts predate vernacular writing on parchment, and what are preserved as early vernacular texts are primarily translations from Latin that are related to the religious sphere. Translations and bilingual texts played an important role throughout the Middle Ages since they brought the word of God to every part of what was becoming Europe and connected even remote areas closer to the religious centre. Moreover, translations contributed to spreading the ideas of a common cultural heritage and descentance. Narratives like those of the Siege of Troy and of Aeneas became part of the learned world of medieval scholars and through their vernacular versions probably also of a larger audience. Whilst in the beginning the study of medieval translations was primarily focused on the reliability and equivalence of the vernacular versions, a lot has happened since. Rita Copeland (1987; 1991; 1993) was among the very first to look at medieval translations as products of the educational and cultural system. She discusses how translation was part of hermeneutics and rhetoric and highlights its crucial role in the emergence of vernacular literary culture in the medieval period. Since then, there have been a number of ground-breaking works that help us to understand the processes leading to the different literate culture of medieval Europe, as for example D.H. Green's work on reading in the Middle Ages (1994) that enhances our understanding of how translations were mediated and received. Our volume will begin with this work and offer more insight into the impact of translations on their receiving cultures as well as the effect of the translation process on the style and form of vernacular literary languages in different time periods. At the same time all chapters contribute to a wider discussion about translation in pre-modern times by engaging with recent theoretical-methodological approaches and applying them to special cases.

Recent developments in medieval translation studies: a brief overview

Over the last thirty years, a growing number of studies have made a decisive contribution to clarifying how we look at medieval translation, understood both as a complex semiotic process and its outcome.¹ The ongoing publication of the volumes

¹ A useful overview is provided in Campbell (2023, 34–46).

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making up the *Medieval Translator* book series from 1989 has progressively drawn scholarly attention to translation as a major form of intercultural communication, focusing mainly, although not exclusively, on the analysis of various examples of the practice of translation in the European Middle Ages from a variety of angles. Other editorial initiatives have been devoted to examining “the notion of the *fidus interpres* or considering the question of fidelity in the broader context of cultural change” (Campbell and Mills 2012, 9).

Broadly speaking, empirical work has largely been favoured over theoretical contributions. An outstanding example of the kind of philological investment that has been made to plough the ground on the huge field of translation activities in the medieval period is the publication in three volumes entitled *Translations médiévales. Cinq siècles de traductions en français au Moyen Âge (XIe–XVe siècles). Étude et repertoire*, edited by Claudio Galderisi (2011).

Copeland’s ground-breaking work on the rise of translation and its nature as a site of opposition between learned Latin and vernacular cultures has elicited a fruitful discussion on the “possible limitations of the *translatio studii et imperii* model for approaching medieval vernacular translation in its entirety” (Campbell and Mills 2012, 10), as shown by studies devoted mainly to medieval Britain (e.g., Wogan-Browne et al. 1999).

The valorisation of the vernacular(s), not only in their hierarchical relation to Latin but also among themselves, is one of the more recent research trends. In particular, multilingualism in medieval textual production has progressively become a major topic in international scholarship.² This has, amongst other things, led to progressively shifting the focus beyond the macrolevel of national cultures (which are, by and large, the result of a modern construction) to pay greater attention to other levels of textual production and dissemination, e.g., focusing on regional contexts and delving more deeply into the dynamics of multilingual vernacular traditions, thus leading to “reframing questions of linguistic and cultural contact” (Campbell and Mills 2012, 12).

Such an endeavour has also resulted in a considerable critical investment in reconceptualizing “linguistic and literary histories in more European or globalizing terms” (Campbell 2023, 36), thus contributing to viewing European literature and its development throughout the medieval period from the perspective of linguistic heterogeneity and cultural multiplicity in terms of centres of production and dissemination of texts, as the project coordinated by David Wallace (2016) shows.

² See, for example, Wogan-Browne et al. (2009), Busby (2017) and the publications of the De Gruyter series, edited by Antonio Montefusco, *Toscana Bilingue. Storia sociale della traduzione medievale / Bilingualism in Medieval Tuscany*. For a broader overview see Campbell and Mills (2012, 10–16). A major study devoted to the movements of vernacular texts by way of translation across parts of medieval Europe is Sif Rikhardsdottir (2012).

As briefly observed above, engagement with theoretical approaches – mostly derived from the contemporary theoretical debate on translation – still tends to be rather scanty, if compared to empirical studies.³

In recent years, attempts to make use of postcolonial models to address medieval translation have started to emerge. A notable example is given in the volume *Rethinking medieval translation. Ethics, politics, theory*, edited by Campbell and Mills (2012), the main aim of which is to “begin a conversation about how medieval translation and the ethical and political questions it raises might productively be explored from perspectives that incorporate but are not limited to postcolonial models” (Campbell and Mills 2012, 16). In the aforementioned volume, Derrida’s theoretical work and its application in Venuti’s approach to translation are profitably used to investigate translation from a different angle.

As far as the deployment of theoretical models is concerned, what is to some extent rather striking is the surprisingly sporadic engagement with polysystem theory, which has been very influential in translation studies around the world but has so far attracted far less attention in medieval translation studies.⁴ Polysystem theory has played a key role in understanding translation as an active element in the shaping of literary systems across time, thus highlighting its innovative contribution to the development of cultures as a result of hierarchical relations.

Translation and vernacular traditions

Translations played an important part in opening the way for not only literary production in the vernacular but also for a wider reception of written literature among the population. From the preserved manuscripts in Scandinavia, we can see that as the number of translations increases there is also a rise in the production of indigenous works in the vernacular and thus a higher evaluation of the vernacular as a literary language. When the vernacular can be used in a variety of contexts, it obtains the same or similar status as Latin and acquires new functions, although the relationship between Latin and the vernacular differed widely between cultures and traditions. However, as Lars Boje Mortensen (2006) demonstrates, vernacular literacy is always firmly grounded on the models of Latin literacy. Translations and the variance of these translated texts during transmission picture the interaction between these Latin models and pre-existing conventions of vernacular literature. Thus, in order to understand the importance of translations we also have to look at the role of Latin literature in a certain region, its production and re-production as the foundation for a

³ On theoretical models and their applicability to medieval translation see Warren (2019).

⁴ An illustration of the relevance of polysystem theory for the study of medieval translation is given in Bampi (2017).

vernacular written language. Latin and the vernacular had different functions and the interaction between works of these languages differed a great deal throughout Europe. The early reception of Latin literature is highly relevant for our understanding of the vernacularisation of Latin script in a certain environment. Translations and discussion of Latin language and literature can tell us about the difficulties in transferring *materia* from different languages and cultures in a new context. Education based on reading, commenting on, and imitating Latin texts laid the foundation for literary production in the vernacular. But before writing in the vernacular could start – be it as simple interlinear translations or the paraphrasing of whole texts – the Latin script must be adapted to the peculiarities of the vernacular. As proven by the so-called First Grammatical Treatise from Iceland, writing and reading in Latin were one thing, but writing in the vernacular was quite different and more difficult than the preserved translations might reveal:

Enn af því at tungurnar er [ó]líkar hverri annarri, þær þegar er ór einni ok inni sǫmu tungu hafa gengizk eða greinzk, þá þarf ólíka stafi í at hafa, en eigi ina sǫmu alla í ǫllum, sem eigi ríta grikkir látínustǫfum girzkuna ok eigi látínუმენn girzkum stǫfum látínu, né enn heldr ebreskir men ebreskuna hvárki girzkum stǫfum né látínu, heldr rítr sínum stǫfum hver þjóð sína tungu.

Hveriga tungu er maðr skal ríta annarar tungu stǫfum, þá verðr sumra stafa vant, [. . .]. En þó ríta enskir men enskuna látínustǫfum, ǫllum þeim er rétræðir verða í enskunni, en þar er þeir vinnask eigi til, þá hafa þeir við aðra stafi, svá marga ok þesskonar sem þarf, en hina taka þeir ór, er eigi eru rétræðir í máli þeira.

Nú eptir þeira dǫmum, alls vér erum einnar tungu, þá at gǫrzk hafi mjök ǫnnur tveggja eða nokkt báðar, til þess at hægra verði at ríta ok lesa, sem nú tíðkisk ok á þessu landi, [. . .] þá hefi ek ritit oss íslendingum stafróf, bæði látínustǫfum ǫllum þeim er mér þótti gegna til várs máls vel, svá at rétræðir mætti verða, ok þeim ǫðrum, er mér þótti í urfa at vera, en ór vǫru teknir þeir, er eigi gegna atkvæðum várrar tungu. Ór eru teknir samhljóðendr nokkurir ór látínustafrófi, en nokkurir í gǫrvir. Raddarstafir e[ru] engir ór teknir, en í gǫrvir mjök margir, því ar vár tunga hefir flesta alla hljóðs eða raddar. (*First Grammatical Treatise*, <https://etext.OLD.no/gramm/>)

But because languages differ from each other – even those that parted or branched off from one and the same tongue – different letters are needed in each, and not the same in all: Greeks do not write Latin with Greek letters, and Latinists (do) not (write) Latin with Greek letters, nor (do) the Hebrews (write) Hebrew with Greek or Latin letters; each nation writes its language with letters of its own.

Whatever language one intends to write with the letters of another language, some letters will be lacking [. . .]. Thus, Englishmen write English with all those Latin letters that can be pronounced correctly in English, but where these do not suffice, they apply other letters, as many and of such a kind as are needed, but they drop those that cannot be correctly pronounced in their language.

Now following their example – since we are of one tongue (with them), even though one of the two (tongues) has changed greatly, or both somewhat – in order that it may become easier to write and read, as is now customary in this country as well [. . .] I have composed an alphabet for us Icelanders as well, both of all those Latin letters that seemed to me to fit our language well – (viz.,) in such a way that they could retain their proper pronunciation – and of those others that seemed to me to be needed (in the alphabet), but those were left out that do not suit the sounds of our language. A few consonants are left out of the Latin alphabet, and some put in;

no vowels are left out, but a good many put in, because our language has almost all sonants or vowels. (*The First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. Benediktsson 1972, 207–209).

This text demonstrates the close interaction between Latin and the vernacular, the importance of the relationship between the languages, and the reflection people invested in this relationship. Although no special Latin source has been identified that was used by the anonymous First Grammarian, it is firmly rooted in common knowledge about grammar as it is transmitted from antiquity through the Middle Ages (*The First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. Benediktsson 1972, 33). Latin learning was the basis for reflection on itself and its own peculiarities. As becomes clear from the quotation above, for Germanic languages with their complicated vowel-system and the umlaut it was not easy to adapt the Latin alphabet to the needs of the vernacular. But it also becomes clear that the First Grammarian and his Icelandic colleagues were aware of other vernaculars and tried to learn from them and their methods of adaptation.

Texts like the First Grammatical are translations in a different sense from those we now consider as translation. They are *translationes* that transfer ideas and knowledge into a new cultural and linguistic environment. And as the First Grammatical Treatise itself makes clear this kind of transfer was more important in the Middle Ages than our modern idea of equivalence. In order to understand this interaction between Latin and vernacular culture and tradition translation studies in medieval literature have developed new methods and approaches.

Instead of approaching a translated text in terms of fidelity to the source text, as was customary in earlier research, translation is now investigated as the result of a process of intercultural mediation from a descriptive perspective.

In many case studies as well as in general discussions about translations in the Middle Ages the focus is now indeed rather on the process of translation as a semiotic process that introduces new genres as well as content to new audiences – as can also be seen from the chapters in this volume. One of the most influential concepts on Translation studies came from Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, briefly mentioned above. In his translation studies he has shown that "the center of the whole polysystem is identical with the most prestigious canonized repertoire. Thus, it is the group which governs the polysystem that ultimately determines the canonicity of a certain repertoire." (Even-Zohar 1990, 17) Translations as well as other innovative literature enter this polysystem at the periphery, but whether they will gain a place in the prestigious centre is dependent on multiple factors. The "struggle" between centre and periphery can be interpreted as an actual social activity among human agents, but also relating to the products and effects of these actions. Even-Zohar's approach was taken up and further developed by Descriptive Translation Studies (Rosa 2016, 94–104; Even-Zohar 1997; Even-Zohar 2005), a target-oriented approach that focuses on the role of translation in cultural history and studies what translation involves, its circumstances and its reasons (Toury 1995, 15).

The adoption of such an approach brings to the fore the nature of translation as an act of rewriting of the source text. Accordingly, divergences in the target text as compared to the source text are now approached as the outcome of a manipulative process of the source text driven by constraints obtaining in the target culture.

Each translation with all its peculiarities and specifics is thus the result of a process of mediation variously influenced by the receiving cultural system of which it becomes a part. Depending on the position of translations in the target culture – its proximity to the centre of the literary system – translations have to adapt to the narrative rules already present or they can become an innovative factor. In cultures with an already established strong vernacular tradition translations of foreign texts were restricted by existing literary conventions. In other cultures – or at other times in the same cultures –, however, translations could be the starting point for vernacular writing and literature and therefore more innovative. From this perspective translations are representations of the transformation that occurs within the interaction of two different languages and their cultures. As hybrid products they combine elements from both cultures. In the Middle Ages, not only individual translations, but whole systems and modes of translation introduced new genres as well as content to new audiences. These translation movements that inaugurated developments in emergent language traditions are important aspects of medieval translation studies.

Translation in this wide sense as an innovative cultural and literary force is also an important part of our umbrella project Modes of Modification (MoMod), where we look at the literary culture of Scandinavia as it has been constituted by variance on all levels, from palaeography and orthography to the transmission of motifs and larger textual units. An important contention at the outset of the program is that this variance is an innovative force that plays a significant role in our understanding of norms and change in the establishing of a literate culture. The choice to reproduce a text or part of it or to introduce the text – be it in Latin or in the vernacular – into a new context always involves interaction with conventions and expectations.

Our contributions in this volume

As part of this programme, we organised a conference hosted at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 2022 on “Translatio – translation and transfer of language, culture, literature”. The contributions collected here come from a broad range of disciplines and focus on the translation of texts in its broadest meaning and from very different perspectives. Rita Copeland looks in her chapter at how the late medieval author Thomas Usk tackles the problem of transferring a certain level of style from Latin into English. In her case study she demonstrates how a cross-cultural system of translation gives rise to a new system of style, a vernacular philosophical style. In a similar vein, Wim Verbaal is interested in elements that might be considered as “untranslatable”. He

suggests that medieval translation is based upon the transfer between distinct universes that are more linked to codes, forces, and social and cultural practices than to a language properly spoken. How this transfer can be achieved is demonstrated in Alex Mueller's chapter on Alexander and the *Ars Dictaminis*, where he looks at the ways in which Alexander's letter writing appealed to a geographically widely dispersed readership. Mueller shows that in the case of the Alexander romance, translating language through letters produces an epistolary style that seeks to satisfy the Latinate, rhythmical, and anti-imperialistic tastes of its clerical writers and audiences. In his chapter Bruce O'Brien proves that the role of translation can only be understood in the broader context of the historical experiences of speech and textual communities. Concentrating on English law texts he lays out their proportions, roles, and relationships with one another and follows the transformation of English law from its earliest examples to the private creation of guides to contemporary law.

Translation as a transformation and rewriting of knowledge is also at the core of Natalia Petrovskaja's chapter about the *Imago mundi* tradition. She focusses on the processes of negotiation that bring content via translation and rewriting to new formats and new cultural environments. These environments are mirrored in the manuscript tradition of texts as Marijana Vuković illustrates with the *Metaphrastic Menologion*, an extensive collection of Byzantine hagiography. Only individual texts were translated into and copied into south Slavic manuscripts. Various translated stories about saints found their places in manuscripts of different purposes and outlooks which sometimes even led to the loss of single texts' autonomy in order to fit them into the manuscripts' overall themes. Yet a different example of *translatio* is to be found in the manuscript AM 618 4°, as seen in Karl G. Johansson's chapter studying the move of both a manuscript and the texts and languages contained in it over a timespan of about four hundred years, divided by three observation-points. In an Anglo-Norman context the manuscript seems to have been part of an innovative stage that placed it centrally in the polysystem. In the next phase two originally probably separate manuscripts were bound together and transferred into a Scandinavian context, again introducing innovative material into a new environment. Finally, in post-Reformation Iceland the manuscript seems to retain some status as it has actually survived while so many manuscripts containing Psalters have been lost. The transferral of Anglo-Norman material into a Scandinavian environment is also at the core of Massimiliano Bampi's and Stefanie Gropper's chapter on the translation of courtly romances in Norway / Iceland and Sweden. Whilst there are some major differences in how the translation of courtly literature had an impact on the Old Norse and the Old Swedish literary systems, in both cases translation played an active part in the shaping and development of its eventual literary polysystem.

We are aware that these chapters can only cover small area(s) of the vast field of medieval translation, but since they are all dealing with different aspects of this field we are confident that they can give new insight and enhance our knowledge and ideas about textual production in the European Middle Ages. Each chapter shows the different dynamics at play in the complicated translation process. In this respect we

hope that our volume is indicative of the importance of studying medieval *translatio* and its various textual manifestations as an integral and active part of cultural production in the medieval period.

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