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Comptes rendus

The Medieval Translator

The Medieval Translator. The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages. Ed. Roger Ellis assisted by Jocelyn Price, Stephen Medcalf and Peter Meredith. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1989. 202 pp.
The Medieval Translator II (Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 5). Ed. Roger Ellis. London: Centre for Medieval Studies, Queen Mary and Westfield College, 1991. xvi, 276 pp.
Translation in the Middle Ages (New Comparison 12). Ed. Roger Ellis. Colchester: University of Essex, 1991. 165 pp.
The Medieval Translator 4. Ed. Roger Ellis and Ruth Evans. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994. x, 256 pp.
The Medieval Translator 5. Ed. Roger Ellis and René Tixier. Turnhout: Brepols, 1995. 488 pp.

These five volumes, all by different publishers, share a common editor - Roger Ellis - and an uncommon passion, the study of medieval translators. Together they form an impressive series of papers drawn from what have come to be known as the Cardiff conferences on the Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages. The actual Cardiff conferences were held in 1987, 1989 and 1991; volume 5 in the published series is drawn from a conference that took place in Conques, France, in 1993, and a future volume will no doubt represent a further conference held in Göttingen, Germany, in 1996. Along with several parallel initiatives1, the Cardiff series provides a significant forum for discussions, debates and discoveries that deserve to be better appreciated within general translation studies.

Having strayed into medieval translation almost by accident, I remain an inexpert outsider who can only comment as such. As an outsider, though, I can perhaps convey some of the fascination that might lead others along similar paths. After the extensive corpora, neat linguistics and relative certitude of work on contemporary translations, there is much to be learned from a field where almost all

the data have to be located through archeology or cunning detective work, where linguistic methods become correspondingly complicated, and where there is no general agreement about what translation is or to what extent its modern conceptualization can be projected onto the past. Perhaps in gut reaction to these fundamental differences, the Cardiff volumes name their object as the medieval translator, the human subject, whereas modernists talk more readily about "translating" or "translations", instinctively carving up the contemporary field in terms of apparently objective processes and products. The medieval studies are resolutely full of people: exiled princes, court poets, traitors awaiting execution, numerous monks and clergymen, a few less nuns, mystic hermits, and many other translators who remain people even when anonymous. Entering this world, outsiders like myself soon become aware that we have been living and studying in the era of the relatively subjectless translator. It is a valuable lesson.

What do medievalists talk about? Better, what do they argue about? Some of the discussions differ little from the issues that arise in other areas of translation studies. Here, as elsewhere, there are debates about the evaluative or descriptive role of the researcher. The weight of philological tradition is such that quite a few medievalists feel obliged to assess each translator's performance in terms of right and wrong, good and bad, insisting on the historical desirability of faithful and accurate translations (see, for example, papers by Kalinke and McEntire in volume 3). Others disagree, arguing that any evaluation imposes our own concepts of translation on a world that was profoundly other. Yet the divergences are not as simple as in other parts of translation studies. A medievalist can always argue that evaluation is futile because we can almost never be certain we have the exemplar, the exact manuscript that the translator was working from. Nor, for that matter, can we be entirely sure we have a fair copy of the translator's actual product. In order to evaluate, one must first establish the two texts to be compared, at the obvious cost of losing the many manuscript variants that nevertheless functioned in history.

In this way, the problem of evaluation feeds into doubts about how to produce critical editions of medieval texts (discussed in an excellent article by C. W. Marx in volume 2), which in turn raises serious questions concerning the very object of historical study. Descriptivists have little trouble attacking evaluative researchers for

selecting fragments and variants able to prove their preselected hypotheses (so Wollin in volume 3). Yet there is more than one curly issue at stake. If the general trend is away from strict evaluative work, a researcher like Kalinke (volume 3), studying Icelandic-Norwegian versions of Old French literature, can nevertheless find and appreciate seventeenth-century manuscripts that are closer to the Old French texts than are earlier manuscripts of the properly medieval versions. She therefore hypothesises, with some justification, that the earlier translators worked accurately and faithfully, that their work was degraded by bad redactors, and that the exactitudes of the later manuscripts are due to a more direct connection with the earlier translators. Come what may, a strict evaluative concept of translation can still be deployed. And there is so little hard evidence in this medieval world that no one can really invalidate the procedure.

The real question, though, is whether there is anything to be gained from separating strict translation strategies from the wide range of rewriting activities that were freely mixed in the Middle Ages. Scribes sometimes took considerable linguistic liberties (see Westrem in volume 4); explanatory material was often inserted without further ado (see Pratt, in volume 2, among many others); apparently superfluous material was unceremoniously omitted (examples appear in numerous papers); and translators often had an active subjective presence in the translated text. All these factors must surely be accounted for.

Perhaps this last-mentioned aspect, the translator's active subjectivity, is the one that creates the most interesting problems. In her account of the medieval category of remaniement or "reworking", Pratt (volume 2) stresses that, in terms of this poetics, adaptors/translators should indicate their capacity for judgement by correcting and transforming source material. Although the trend in the Middle Ages was against innovation, this particular tradition viewed linguistic fidelity in a negative light. The real question is then who is or is not a translator, in what sense of the word, and if indeed there is any sense that matters. As C. W. Marx argues, since "authors, translators and scribes were frequently one and the same" (3.266) there is often little to be gained from describing the transmission processes in terms of separate functions. In many cases translation and editing are inseparable (Burnley, volume 1). There are significant moments when translators assume the discursive role of the

compilator, the compiler/commentator who can also be a kind of preacher (Johnson, volume 1). Chaucer made little distinction between his translating and his "original writing" (Machan, volume 1). Elsewhere, translators becomes narrators commenting not just on the difficulty of their task but also on the actual qualities of what they might call "my author" (see, among others, Brook in volume 2 and Hosington who, in the same volume, describes a case where the translator suddenly intervenes, using the first person, some 2000 lines into the translation). No neat distinction between the translating and narrating voices would seem to hold up for very long: Although Wace's asides in his Roman de Brut might be recognised as the voice of an active translator, when the resulting text was translated by others Wace was incorporated as an intervening narrator in the fullest sense of the term (Allen in volume 3). A variant on these blurred boundaries would be the medieval translator's discursive proximity to the "clerkly narrator" of hagiographies, who transmitted not just words or meanings but also the magical-ritual power of the saint concerned (Wogan-Browne in 4). Although such figures find little place in modernist theories of translation, they might yet resurface in various postmodernist guises, especially with respect to the actively intervening voices of visible translators. Medieval history is not the only area of translation studies that necessarily goes beyond the anonymous translator projected by linguistic ideals.

Feminist criticism is also a perhaps surprisingly significant element of this more human frame. Among others, Barratt (volume 1) brings to light a previously unnoticed woman translator of the fifteenth century; Evans (volume 3) seeks out the role of women not just as translators but also as a specific readership for whom translations were produced; Phillips (volume 4) shows how a male voice translated into a female voice by Chaucer is accorded a narrower range of qualities; Wogan-Browne (volume 4) discusses three women hagiographers; Voaden (volume 5) deals with the discourse of women visionaries. The Middle Ages were not quite as full of men as they might appear.

The cultural scope of these volumes is dominated by translations into various stages of English (entirely so in the case of volume 1), although there are articles on work into Swedish, Middle High German, Middle Dutch, Old Norse, Old French, Hebrew, Castilian and Medieval Welsh. All things considered, this is an impressive

range. Yet it is by no means a balanced coverage. There is certainly a need for greater integration of other cultural players, perhaps a few more Semitic or Slavic translators, for example. A better spread will hopefully come as a result of further conferences in the series, to remind us that the intellectuals of medieval Europe probably formed more of a cultural union than we do now.

An expansion in this multicultural direction might perhaps be offset by some curtailing in others. For instance, the series as we have it includes studies on modern translations of medieval texts, as well as a few papers that develop the more metaphorical senses of translation. This can lead to fascinating material like comparisons with marginally post-medieval techniques or even with translation as the physical moving of saints' relics (Ashley and Sheingorn in volume 5), among much else. Or again, Anne Savage (volume 4) describes the experience of being pregnant while she was translating Anchoritic texts on hatred of the physical body. As much as I would like to know more about the movements of religious artefacts and the experience of a translative pregnancy (really!), I struggle to see any general frame able to make all these insights pertinent to the main fields of inquiry. Similarly, I suspect that collective progress requires something more than tacking Walter Benjamin onto a discussion of a nontranslated mystical text in order to insist that all translation is like the impossible approach to God (Watson in volume 3). In short, some of these texts have little to do with the immediate issues of translation history. I would suggest that future volumes include more cultures and a few less metaphors.

Perhaps because of the diversity of approaches, no overall theory seems likely to emerge from these papers. This is despite an excellent paper by Rita Copeland (volume 1) that explores the relations between Jerome and the context of classical rhetoric, opening up the paradoxes of translation as both creation and replacement, continuity and rupture. Roger Ellis, in his introduction to the first volume, suggests that these might be two poles between which all medieval translation practices could be located. However, as the later volumes reveal, there was much more going on. Copeland stresses the importance of the general political and discursive context of translation theory, and no one can pretend that a simple polarity of formal alternatives can capture all the various contexts of the Middle Ages. Further, as Ruth Evans points out (volume 4), Copeland herself privileges theory and high-culture translators,

overlooking the ruck of diverse practices and the more downmarket struggles for the vernaculars.

This is where careful attention must be paid to the insights of the individual researchers who, although often wrapped up in their own authors, periods or genres, have much to offer before any broad overview can be ventured. This is also why Roger Ellis, as a careful and generous editor, helpfully uses his introductions to synthesise the main points rather than to take sides or exclude. The medievalists are building their castles stone by verified stone, from the ground up, with relatively few of the sweeping statements or hermeneutic gestures that characterise our contemporary theorists. No doubt because of the complexity of their task, or simply because their historical vision spans centuries, they would appear to be less hurried than most of us. Patience might be another lesson to be learned from their work.

1. See Jeanette Beer, ed. Medieval Translators and their Craft (Studies in Medieval Culture, 25). Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1989, which includes papers from the sessions on translation held at the annual International Congress for Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Further material has been generated by the conferences on translation history held in León, Spain, in 1987, 1990, 1993 and 1996, papers from which have been published in the two volumes of Fidus Interpres, ed. Julio-César Santoyo et al., León: Secretariado de Publicaciones de la Universidad de León, 1989, and in the journal Livius, also published by the Universidad de León. In French, see the conference proceedings edited by Geneviève Contamine, Traduction et traducteurs au Moyen Age. Paris: CNRS, 1989. All these volumes provide valuable introductions to research published in the more specialised journals.

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