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## LAURENT DE PREMIERFAIT, TRANSLATOR OF CICERO AND BOCCACCIO

His name no longer figures among the great translators of history, yet, in his time and in the century that followed his death, Laurent de Premierfait's work was widely disseminated and appreciated by the nobility of several European countries. The impressive number of manuscripts still remaining attests to his popularity and his widespread appeal. Although scholars disagree on the exact figures, it seems that there are at least one hundred and thirty copies of his translations still to be found in various libraries of Europe and the United States. For the historian, his translations reveal a great deal about the attitudes and methods of translators at the end of the Middle Ages. Better yet, he wrote copious prefaces and prologues about the art of translating in which he expounded at length about his views and intentions. Thanks to these introductions and to the translations themselves, we can trace his development and draw a clearer picture of the prevailing views of translation at the time.

In the last half of the fourteenth century, France had sunk into decline and turmoil as a result of political and natural disasters. The country was fighting the English in the Hundred Years War and plague epidemics had decimated town and country alike. Nonetheless, learning and culture still flourished in some pockets, principally around the figures of the king and of the pope in Avignon.

Charles V (1337-1380), as well as other members of the Valois family, collected manuscripts and seems to have been well-read in law and history. He encouraged the nobles around him to be educated so that they might become better rulers (Bordonove 1985: 221). Because of his passion for knowledge, he was a great patron to translators like Nicolas Oresme and Raoul de Presles. His younger brother, Jean, Duke of Berry (1340-1416), was an equally avid collector of manuscripts and patronized artists and translators alike.

The papacy had embroiled itself in temporal and political questions and in the early fourteenth century, the papal court was moved to Avignon. In 1378, however, the Italians chose their own pope in Rome who the French refused to recognize, effectively dividing the papacy. Avignon became a cosmopolitan centre, an intellectual gathering place where ambassadors and scholars from many parts of Christendom met and exchanged ideas.

French literature was at a crossroads of a sort. On the one hand, the chivalrous tradition continued to prosper with the popularity of Froissart's *Chroniques*, a collection of tales of courtly love and heroic knights. On the other, a critical view of feudal society, based on the more rational ideas of the Classical authors, was slowly emerging. Jean de Meun's reworking of *le*

*Roman de la Rose* enjoyed success throughout the fourteenth century. To the original, he had added some 18 000 lines (Duby et Mandrou 1969: 205), most of them translations from Ovid, other Classical authors and the most influential thinkers of the Middle Ages. Its popularity among the circles which it, in effect, reproved the most, was due to the fact that it offered a veritable compendium of knowledge in an easily digestible form. The nobles spoke French and did not necessarily know Latin or Greek, the languages used by the scholars; Jean de Meun gave them a glimpse of the work undertaken in the University in a language they understood. This idea of popularizing what had previously been in the hands of just a few certainly influenced Laurent de Premierfait's attitude towards translation.

Both Paris and Avignon play an important role in Laurent de Premierfait's life. Born around 1380 in Premierfait in Champagne, he has left us few details of his early life except that he was a cleric in the diocese of Troyes. Then, in 1397, he sent a poem in Latin to one Giovanni Moccia, a respected poet and secretary in the Papal Court at Avignon. In the same year, he travelled to Avignon and thanks to Moccia's influence, became secretary to Cardinal Amadeo de Saluzzo. His reputation as a fine poet grew, at least among the early humanists like Jean de Montreuil and Nicolas de Clamanges assembled there, and won him this mention written by an anonymous source: "Iste Laurentius cognomento de Primefacto fuit poeta et orator exemius"(quoted by Purkis 1946-50: 23).

The term "humanist" should be explained: Laurent de Premierfait, Jean de Montreuil and Nicolas de Clémange did not use this word to describe themselves (according to *La grande encyclopédie Larousse* it was coined in the nineteenth century). Humanism first emerged in Italy, and more specifically in Florence, then spread to Avignon and Paris through frequent contacts between French and Italian men of letters. Some Classical authors were of course well known by scholars of theology and jurisprudence but the humanists were interested in all aspects of the ancient world, not just in the practical solutions offered by some of its thinkers. They read the poetry and imitated it, they studied their conception of the world and of mankind. Translators played an obviously important role in developing humanism, as a study of Laurent de Premierfait's works will show.

Laurent stayed in Avignon for two years then travelled to Paris. Thanks to his humanist friends, he found employment as translator first for Louis of Bourbon, one of the king's uncles, then for Jean, the Duke of Berry. With the protection of these powerful men, he devoted the rest of his life to translating Cicero, Boccaccio and Aristotle. At least, these are the only works still in existence; he may have continued to write poetry but only one poem from his Paris days has survived (*ibid.* : 26). He died in 1418, perhaps from the plague which terrorized Paris that year or, like Jean de Montreuil, in the massacre of the Armagnacs by the Burgundians.

There are six major translations attributed to Laurent de Premierfait during this eighteen year span and the following is their brief description in chronological order.

The first, dating from 1400, is a translation of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, written between 1355 and 1360 in Latin. Boccaccio, disgusted by the vagaries and corruption of princes, popes and kings, had collected stories of "the most memorable and crushing blows dealt by fate to the illustrious personages of mythology and history" (Bergen 1924: x-xi). Laurent's version is almost word-for-word and is entitled *De la Ruyne des nobles hommes et femmes*.

In 1405, he presented Louis de Bourbon with a translation of Cicero's *De senectute* (*Le livre de Tullies de vieillesse*). In this second work, he elaborated the style that characterized most of his subsequent works.

He started his third translation, Cicero's *De amicitia*, in 1406 for Louis de Bourbon. However, he did not finish *De la vraye amitié* until 1416 and dedicated it at that time to the Duke of Berry; Louis had died in 1410.

Apparently dissatisfied with his first translation of *De casibus virorum illustrium*, Laurent wrote a much lengthier version of it in 1409, based on the first version, not on Boccaccio's original. This second version, *Des cas des ruynes des nobles hommes et femmes*, was by far the more popular, some fifty manuscripts of it having been preserved (Purkis 1946-50: 28). It was also one of the first French books to be printed.

Between 1411 and 1414, he wrote the first French version of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the work he is best remembered for today. The original was in Italian and Laurent asked a Franciscan friar, Antonio of Arezzo, to translate it into Latin first. As the translated title *Des Cent nouvelles* implies, it is a collection of tales and stories. Unlike *De Casibus*, these stories are about contemporary Italian society and the characters are from all walks of life.

Laurent's last work dates from the year of his death; it is a translation from a Latin version of Aristotle's *Economics*. It bears the title *Yconomiques* and is dedicated to Simon du Bois, a member of the royal household (the Duke of Berry had died in 1416.)

Laurent de Premierfait was very successful as a translator; his works were well-received and he enjoyed the patronage of some of the most influential men of his time. He was well educated and belonged to an enlightened circle of men yet his acquaintances and education do not necessarily explain his success as a translator. In studying his lifework, it becomes apparent that Laurent also understood his position as a translator very well. In his prefaces and through the translations themselves, he echoed and exposed the prevalent attitudes of his contemporaries towards translation. He shows us how translators viewed themselves, how they tried to resolve their obligations towards the original text and to their audience, what purpose translations served and how they coped with problems of language and style. Translators always face the same

questions but answer them differently with each new age. No doubt Laurent's methods may seem ludicrous to the modern mind but they obviously worked in his time.

Even the words "translation" and "translator" present a problem: can a work three times as long as its original be considered a translation, as is the case for the second version of *De casibus virorum illustrium*? In the preface to the 1400 version of *De casibus*, Laurent calls himself an "escripseur" (quoted by Gathercole 1960: 366), a term which could be interpreted either literally, since many people could not write, or somewhat more figuratively, in the modern sense. It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the fine line between "writer" and "translator" but the very fact that such a question arises proves that the concept of translation was much broader and freer than it is now. Laurent certainly had some autonomy and a good deal of control over his own work; when he rewrote *De casibus* in 1409, he explained "Aussi peut ung potier casser et rompre aulcun sien vaissel, combien qu'il soit bien fait, pour lui donner autre forme qui luy semble meilleure" (quoted by Chavy 1988: 1161).

Laurent nonetheless translated for his patrons and it is obvious from everything he has written that they were uppermost in his mind when he worked. The translator bridged the gap between the scholars and the court. He had a double mission: to render Latin into French and to instruct his readers about a culture they barely knew. The success of *Le Roman de la Rose* had proven that the nobles, these "hommes moyennement lettrez" (quoted by Gathercole 1960: 367) were interested in the classics but only if they were entertained in the process. Since he depended on them for his livelihood, he necessarily bowed to their wishes.

His relationship with his patrons was dutifully respectful and he seems to have been very aware of his dependence on them. In the dedication of the *Decameron* to the Duke of Berry, he took great pain to set financial matters straight: "Toute la retribucion du labour et de la depece dudit livre depuis a este liberalement faicte et administree, en tant que vous estes le vray et seul mediateur par qui le dit livre est ainsi compile et escrit" (quoted by Purkis 1946-50: 30).

He owed them allegiance but recognized their moral shortcomings; he was a cleric, after all. The Duke of Berry, for instance, is known to have levied heavy taxes on his subjects, the better to pay for his expensive collections of manuscripts and precious objects. In his dedication of the second version of *De casibus*, he "discussed the question of man's relation to fortune, the abuses of the church and priesthood, the conduct of the nobility and the condition of the agricultural labourers" (Bergen 1924: xiv). Yet, in the *Decameron* dedication, he flattered this same patron and made a great show of humility, asking for his protection:

A vous donc excellent, noble, puissant duc et prince... je attribue et dedie

cette presente mienne oeuvre de long et grand labeur; si veuillez des maintenant a tousjours deffendre ma cause comme la vostre contre les detracteurs qui injustement voudront par aventure contraster a ceste vostre oeuvre par moy faicte au moins mal que j'ay peu (quoted by Purkis 1946-50: 30).

Before condemning Laurent as a hypocrite, it has to be explained that there was an important rhetorical tradition of appealing to the reader by flattering him and by denigrating oneself as in this introduction from the first version of *De casibus*: "Et combien que le fardeau dont vous m'avez chargié surmonte la petitesse de mes forces" (quoted by Gathercole 1960: 366).

All initial flourishes and rhetorical constraints aside, this worry of pleasing the patron and reader had a great effect on the translation itself. First and foremost, he had to keep his audience interested; boredom, then, was the greatest enemy (Rener 1989: 233). In his first translation of *De casibus*, he had kept very close to the original; it met with little success. In the second version, he decided to change tactics to better please his readers:

Je doncques, selon le jugement commun, en amendant se je puis la premiere translacion dudit livre, vueil, sans rien condamner, autrefois translater ledit livre, affin c'est assavoir que, de tant qu'il sera plus cler et plus ouvert en sentences et parolles, de tant il delectera à lire et à escouter plusieurs hommes et femmes (quoted by Chavy 1980: 1161).

Fidelity to the original was not an important criterion for judging the value of the translation. There was no awe for literature as there is today, no concern for preserving a writer's particular style. Only the Bible and other sacred works merited reverence:

Car je congnois par moy et aussi jay oy dire a hommes sages et auctorisez, que entre lectrez francois ne advint oncques si grant abusion ne si reprouvee maniere comme d'avoir translate en langaige vulgar la sainte Bible, escripte artificielement par saints docteurs latins. Les translateurs, quelz qu'ilz soient, ont commis sacrilege en desrobant, ravissant et ostant la beaulte et latour du tres precis langaige et la mageste des sentences, et par entremesler impertinens et malsonans parolles... Et ainsi raisonnablement il loist et est permis translater seulement en vulgar celles histoires ou escriptures qui ont ung seul sens et entendement simple selon la pure lettre (quoted by Rener 1980: 45).

Whether Laurent really found the texts he translated that simple and unambiguous is debatable. This quote clearly shows the limits he placed on translation. There were two tiers in the hierarchy of texts and languages: the

Bible and Latin reigned uppermost while other texts and French humbly stood by. With such a view of his work, Laurent had greater freedom to translate as he saw fit: the original could be altered without any scruples to suit the taste of the readers.

Economic, political and ideological constraints forced Laurent to make certain decisions before he even started the task of translating. The next point to study is the effect these decisions had on the translations themselves.

The key problem in translation has always been to find equivalence between two languages. Laurent's readers had little knowledge of Latin so he had to write in a tongue familiar to them. In the prologue to *De la Vraye amitié*, he explains, "je useray de si appert et si commun langage que les hommes moyennement lettrez me entenderont entierement" (quoted by Gathercole 1960: 367). For the translators of Laurent's day the task was further complicated by the fact that Latin was a highly evolved, rich idiom while French, especially in its written form, was barely emerging from its cocoon. Laurent had to translate "les sentences prinses du propre langage de l'acteur, qui est moult subtil et artificiel" (quoted by Chavy 1980: 1161) into a "langage vulgar qui par nécessité de motz est petit et legier" (quoted by Gathercole 1960:367). In his first translation, he barely altered the Latin words or the dense sentence structure of the original; in the 1409 version, he took care to use more common French words: for example, "indignam" in the Latin was first translated as "indigne" then as "dure" (Gathercole 1956: 306). When the word and its concept were unfamiliar to the reader, he would explain it: "sapientes" (*De amicitia*) became "stoiques disans nul homme estre saige se il cheoit mesmement en aucun legier pechié" (Gathercole 1960: 367). He also had recourse to doublets, a popular strategy of using two words where the original only had one, to further clarify nuances of meaning: "gravem" (*De senectute*) thus became "ennuyeuse et pesante" (*ibid.*: 367). He also omitted words or passages but it is impossible to determine whether he did so on purpose or as the result of a simple oversight (Gathercole 1956: 307-308).

Laurent had to translate a culture, not just a language. His readers were unfamiliar with the names of Greek and Roman personages, places and ideas; only a few scholars and humanists were equal to the sophistication of Classical culture:

Les livres latins ditez et escritz par les philosophes, poetes et historiens bien enseignez en toutes sciences humaines sont moult loing et desservez de l'entendement que dame Nature donne communement aux hommes. Pour ce donc convient, ce me semble, que les livres latins en leurs translacions soient muez et convertis en tel langage que les liseurs et les escouteurs d'iceulx puissent comprendre l'effect de la sentence sans trop grant et trop long travail de entendement (quoted by Chavy: 1161).

Thus to initiate his readers to a different world, he had to provide explanations for any obscure or unknown reference: "ce qui semble trop brief ou trop obscur, je le alongiray en exposant par mots et par sentences" (quoted by Purkis 1946-50: 27). He took great care to instruct at every opportunity, sometimes adding passages taken from a different author altogether. In the introduction of *De la Vraye amitié*, he said he included "en somme et soubz briefce tout ou la plus grant partie des conclusions ou sentences mises et affermees par Aristote en ses deux livres de Ethiques cy paravant nommez" (quoted by Gathercole 1960: 27).

In another instance, in *Les Cent nouvelles*, a brief mention of the island of Cyprus by Boccaccio becomes a paragraph that includes the island's location, its history, its rulers (Purkis 1946-50: 31). Likewise, in the second version of *De casibus*, a sentence about Medea stretches into a long list of all her horrible misdeeds (Gathercole 1954: 248). This particular example shows Laurent's concern with moral instruction, not just encyclopedic information. Since *De casibus* is a cautionary tale, he had to ensure that his readers knew exactly how wicked these characters were. In this work too, he deleted the names of pagan gods (*ibid.*: 251); as a cleric, he may have felt it wrong to confuse his readers with non-Christian beliefs. He seemed concerned that the works he translated be judged morally sound or instructive in some way. At least, this is what we can deduce since he felt compelled to defend the translation of the *Decameron*, a lighter work:

Et combien que selon le hastif jugement de celui ou de ceulx qui sans precedente et longue consideracion dient et prononcent leur sentence, les Cent Nouvelles semblent plus servir a delectation que au commun ou particulier prouffit, neantmoins l'escouteur ou liseur qui longuement et meurement advisera le compte de chacune nouvelle, il trouvera es histoires racomptees plus profit que delict. Car illec sont tous vices morsillez et reprins, et les vertus et bonnes moeurs y sont admonnestees et looez en autant et plus de manieres comme est le nombre des nouvelles (quoted by Purkis 1946-50: 30-31).

In contrast with the 1409 translation of *De casibus*, Laurent added very little to the *Decameron*, though he took some liberties in the preface of each tale. The work, after all, did not call for amplification or an explanation of each character since they sprang from Boccaccio's imagination not from Greek and Roman history and legends. He also felt *Les Cent Nouvelles* were written more for purposes of diversion than *Du cas*. The comparison of the number of manuscripts of the two works leads to the conclusion that his contemporary readers not only preferred the exploits of long-dead legends but approved of Laurent's didacticism and sententiousness and encouraged him in this tack.

Instruction being his primary goal, Laurent paid much more attention to the

content of his various translations than to the style in which he wrote them. Patricia Gathercole lists the characteristics of his style: "repetitions, complicated sentences [that] fill many pages; the use of couplets, the everyday comparisons and the tedious employment of 'et' and 'ou'..." (Gathercole 1960: 370). His translation of the *Decameron* has been particularly criticized since "it occasioned the disappearance of much of Boccaccio's irony and incisive style" (Purkis 1946-50: 29). It is important to remember, though, that Laurent worked from a Latin translation and that the criticisms are based on the printed editions which show considerable changes from the manuscripts.

The 1409 version of *Des cas des ruynes des nobles hommes et femmes* remained his most popular work for a century after his death. Its influence spread beyond France and Lydgate based his *Fall of the Princes* on this version rather than on the original. Gradually, however, *Les Cent Nouvelles* eclipsed it. It spawned an imitation entitled *Des Cent Nouvelles nouvelles* "qui sont la première grande manifestation littéraire de la Renaissance en France" (quoted by Purkis 1946-50: 34). It also influenced a number of other works and rekindled an interest in telling stories that were not based on the chivalric tradition. Laurent's translation stood until 1545 when Anthoine de Maçon published a new translation, based on the Italian this time, for Marguerite de Navarre.

Laurent de Premierfait's popularity and influence are undeniable. He was esteemed in his own time for popularizing classical knowledge heretofore unknown to his readers. He helped sow the seeds of humanism that would truly blossom during the Renaissance. With his translation of the *Decameron*, he influenced subsequent writers to develop a budding French literature. If some find faults with his style, it must be pointed out that "good" style is not only subjective but that it emerges only through a lengthy trial-and-error process. The Latin Laurent translated had had the luxury to evolve over a period of centuries while the French he translated into was only beginning to develop as a literary form. He is an impressive proof of Edmond Cary's assertion that "la traduction...a été la grande accoucheuse des littératures" (quoted by Delisle et Woodworth 1995: 78). For the modern translation historian, Laurent de Premierfait, through his extensive introductions, has left many insights into the role that translation played in the late Middle Ages.

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Source : Ce portrait a été présenté en 1995 par Tiphaine Crenn dans le cadre du cours d'histoire de la traduction TRA 5901 donné à l'École de traduction et d'interprétation, Université d'Ottawa.