Translations, versions and commentaries on poetry in the 15th- and 16th centuries

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the monograph "Translations, versions and commentaries on poetry in the 15th- and 16th centuries", which includes four studies dealing with translations from vernacular to vernacular, of works by Dante, Petrarch, Alain Chartier and Jan van der Noot.

KEYWORDS

Medieval poetry; 16th-century poetry; Medieval and Renaissance translations; translations in verse; commentaries; self-translation; Dante; Andreu Febrer; Petrarch; Alain Chartier; Anne de Graville; Jan van der Noot.

RESUM

Aquest article presenta la monografia "Translations, versions and commentaries on poetry in the 15th- and 16th centuries", que aplega quatre estudis sobre traduccions entre llengües vulgars d'obres de Dante, Petrarca, Alain Chartier i Jan van der Noot.

PARAULES CLAU

Poesia medieval; poesia del segle xvi; traduccions medievals i renaixentistes; traduccions en vers; comentaris; autotraduccions; Dante; Andreu Febrer; Petrarca; Alain Chartier; Anne de Graville; Jan van der Noot

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Dante's words on the issue of translating poetry, which appear in his work *Il Convivio* (1304-1307), are well known:

> E però sappia ciascuno che nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzata si può della sua loquela in altra transmutare sanza rompere tutta sua dolcezza ed armonia. E questa è la cagione per che Omero non si mutò di greco in latino, come l'altre scritture che avemo da loro. E questa è la cagione per che i versi del Salterio sono sanza dolcezza di musica e d'armonia: ché essi furono transmutati d'ebreo in greco e di greco in latino, e nella prima transmutazione tutta quella dolcezza venne meno. (Brambilla ed. 1995)

> 'As regards this last point, everyone should recognize that no writing fashioned into a harmonious unity by its musical form can be translated from its original language without all its sweetness and harmony being destroyed. That is why Homer has not been translated from Greek into Latin, unlike the other writings which the Greeks have bequeathed to us. That is why the verses of the Psalter lack music and harmony: they were translated from Hebrew to Greek, and from Greek to Latin, all their sweetness disappearing with that first translation'. (Ryan ed. 1989)

This passage (*Il Convivio*: I, 7, §14-15) reflects the predominant conception of poetic translation in the Middle Ages, namely that classical poetic texts should only be translated in prose into vernacular languages, because any attempt to convey their "dolcezza ed armonia" was considered futile. Indeed, because of the cultural prestige of Latin, the primary goal when translating these texts was to transmit their meaning precisely, without attempting to reproduce metre or versification. The translation of classical poetic texts into prose was a common practice in all Romance languages: for example, at the end of the 14th century, Ovid's *Heroides* was translated into Catalan prose, followed, at the turn of the 15th century, by Seneca's *Tragedies*. Both prose versions integrate, to differing degrees, glosses or scholastic commentaries on the original works, a widespread medieval practice that continued into the 16th century.[1] The vernacular texts were not seen as being equivalent to the original, given that vernacular languages were considered to be of a lower linguistic and cultural level than Latin (Badia 1994: 33).

Meanwhile, poetic translation between vernacular languages that were linguistically close —as is the case with the Romance languages— and at the same cultural level, was unnecessary. This combination of factors explains why there are almost no translations into verse in the 13th- and 14th centuries. The few exceptions, in the form of adaptations or versions, provide important precedents. One example is the Sicilian composition *Madonna dir vo voglio* by Giacomo da Lentini (c.1210-c.1250), in which two stanzas of the *canso* by Folquet de Marseille (1155-1231) *A vos, midontç, voill rettrair'en cantan* are translated with different metre and versification. The poem *Complaint of Venus* by Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400) is a translation into English, following the original metre, of three ballads in French by Oton de Grandson (c.1345-1397).

From the beginning of the 15th century, the phenomenon of poetic translations between vernacular languages began to spread, but it was not until the 16th century that it had become commonplace. As we will see, the first translations of commentaries on the works of Dante and

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1. For the reception and translation of the classics into Catalan in the Middle Ages, see Cabré *et al.* 2018.

Petrarch also appeared at the end of the 15th- and the beginning of the 16th centuries.

This monograph includes four studies, each dealing with the reception and translation of work by a different author. The first study analyses the Catalan translation made by Andreu Febrer (1429) of Dante's *Commedia*; the second looks at how Petrarch's *Trionfi* and the commentary made on it by Bernardo Illicino, which was translated into Catalan, French, and Spanish, was disseminated across Europe in the early 16th century; the third study analyses Anne de Graville's version of the famous poem *La Belle Dame sans merci* by Alain Chartier; and the final study introduces the bilingual Dutch and French author Jan van der Noot and the translations he made of his own work.

In the first article, Raquel Parera (Universitat Pompeu Fabra) explores the translation of Dante's *Commedia* made in 1429 by Andreu Febrer (c.1375-1440/1444), a poet in the service of the King of Aragon Alfons the Magnanimous. This was the first time that a major translation had been made between Romance languages in which the translation was versified and an aesthetic product in its own right. The reverence that 15th-century authors felt for Dante partly explains the metrical fidelity shown by Febrer, who skilfully sculpted Dante's *terzines* into a Catalan equivalent. Converting the Italian hendecasyllable to the equivalent Catalan decasyllable, while keeping the chained structure of the *terza rima* was a challenging metrical constraint that Febrer imposed on himself in the already arduous task of translating a work as complex as the *Commedia*. Such an audacious undertaking could only have been conceived by an outstanding verse poet such as Febrer, who had already revitalised Catalan poetry by experimenting with the traditional *trobar ric* and adapting the French fixed forms.[2] Parera's study is the first to analyze in detail the techniques and translation strategies used by Febrer in his translation. Leaving aside the evaluative point of view with which this translation had been previously approached, Parera demonstrates through close textual analysis that Febrer's Catalan translation of the *Commedia* is precise and faithful to the original, and that Febrer retained both the sense and the music of the Italian *terzine*.[3]

In our monograph's second article, Leonardo Francalanci (Notre Dame University) presents Bernardo Ilicino's commentary on Petrarch's *Trionfi*. Its success in print and the enormous dissemination of this commentary between the last quarter of the 15th- and the first years of the 16th centuries conform a second phase of Petrarchism, both in Italy and in the rest of Europe. Whole generations of readers read Petrarch's *Trionfi* through Ilicino. Francalanci's article presents a comparative study of the three known translations of Ilicino's *Commentary*: in Catalan, French, and Spanish. He also reviews the translations of the *Trionfi* for which there is no commentary. Thus, Francalanci shows that, although the *Commentary* continued to be received and translated by 16th-century readers, the reception of Petrarch's poem was already in line with the horizon of Petrarchism.

In the third article, Joan E. McRae (Middle Tennessee State University) presents the adaptation in *rondeaux* made by Anne Graville (c. 1490-c. 1540) of *La Belle Dame sans merci* by Alain Chartier (1424). Alain Chartier (1385/95-1430) was secretary, ambassador and personal adviser to King Charles VII of France, and his works, as a prestigious writer in Latin and French, were widely circulated throughout Europe. His greatest success came with the courtly poem in *La Belle Dame sans merci* (1424), which is essentially an eight-hundred-line dialogue between a gentleman in love and a heartless lady who rejects him. This was the *à la page* plotline in the courts of the time

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2. As well as being skilled at constructing verse, Andreu Febrer was a great poet and familiar with a wide literary tradition. His poems show the subtle influence of Arnaut Daniel, Guillaume de Machaut and Dante. For a detailed analysis of these issues and an overview of Andreu Febrer as a literary figure, see Cabré 2007.

3. For the Catalan translation of the *Commedia*, see Gallina 1974-1988 and Parera 2018.

and excited the French nobility and poets, generating an intense literary debate that inspired imitations and sequels. *La Belle Dame sans merci* was the subject of three translations in verse: Sir Richard Roos' English translation (c.1430-1442), Francesc Oliver's Catalan translation (c. 1457) and Carlo del Nero's Italian translation (1471).[4] Anne de Graville, an author and humanist at the court of Francis I and Queen Claude of France, also translated Boccaccio's *Theseus* into French. McRae's study provides an in-depth analysis of the manuscript that contains Graville's adaptation in *rondeaux* of *La Belle Dame sans merci*, and establishes that she used different manuscripts as sources for her version. Thus, McRae's ecdotic study reveals the base manuscript used by Graville.

The final article by Adrian Armstrong (Queen Mary-University of London) introduces the bilingual work, in French and Dutch, of the writer Jan van der Noot (1539-95?). Noot's work in Dutch, *Het Theater,* and its French version, *Le Theater,* were each printed in London in 1568, although it was common for the two versions of his plays to be published together in bilingual editions. It was previously thought that Van der Noot wrote his works in French first and later translated them into Dutch, introducing innovations into Dutch poetry by imitating the work of Pierre Ronsard (1524-1585) and other members of La Pléiade. The novelty of Armstrong's study is that through a meticulous analysis of the metre and versification of the two versions of Van der Noot's works, he concludes that van der Noot's self-translations are in fact translations from Dutch into French, and not the other way round. To support this argument Armstrong also considers the role of paratext and illustrations.

In short, the four articles demonstrate that a dual approach is necessary when studying poetic translation of the 15th- and 16th centuries. It is imperative to analyse not only the manuscript tradition of an original and/or its printed copies but also a work's versification and metre. In order to be able to objectively evaluate a Medieval or Renaissance translation, it is essential to start from the manuscript or group of manuscripts and/or printed copies that are closest to the one used by the translator in their work. If it is not possible to determine the origins of a translation in this way, the next best option is to compile as many variants as possible. Only by following this process is it possible to determine a translation's characteristics and evaluate it. It is also very useful for the study of these translations to compare translations into other languages of the same text in the same period, both from an ecdotic perspective and for the study of translation techniques and resources available to the translator. Finally, as every translation is a historical product, it is essential to understand the poetic tradition of each translator. By analysing the translators' solutions in the light of their respective literary traditions, and within their historical and cultural frameworks, we come closer to a precise and detailed vision of the translations of Medieval and Renaissance texts.

We would like to dedicate this monograph to the memory of Giuseppe Francalanci.

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4. For a deeper insight into Alain Chartier, see Cayley-Kinch 2008; Delogu-McRae-Cayley 2015.

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