

"...and othere bokes tok me ... To reede upon": Medieval Translation and Cultural Transformation

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Özet

Ortaçağ çeviri kuramı klasik dönem çeviri kuramlarından kaynaklanır ancak çevirilere yazılan önsözler göstermektedir ki Ortaçağ çevirmeni klasik çeviri kuramını kendi amaçları doğrultusunda kullanmış ve çevirinin kültürel ve ideolojik amaçlarına hizmet etmesini sağlamıştır. Bu makalenin temel savına göre İngiliz Ortaçağ döneminde çeviri daha çok bir kültürel proje olarak düşünülebilir çünkü çevirmenlerin en çok ilgilendiği konu yapılan çevirinin amaç kültürde yapacağı etki ve oynayacağı roldür.

Anahtar kelimeler: ortaçağda çeviri, ortaçağ çevirmeni, çeviri ve kültür, çeviri kuramı

Abstract

This paper argues that English medieval translation can be considered as part of a cultural project in that the medieval translator is concerned more with the role and the function of translation in the target culture. Medieval translation theory derives from the classical theories of translation, however, prefaces to translations indicate that medieval translator appropriates the classical translation theory and uses it to serve the cultural and ideological objectives of translation in the Middle Ages.

Key words: medieval translation, medieval translator, translation and culture, translation theory.

The pioneering work of Jeannette Beer and Roger Ellis has decidedly promoted medieval translation as a significant area, and has established medieval translation as the work of culturally responsible, academically oriented people of learning.¹ Susan

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¹ The problematic situation of Medieval translation in the academia is discussed by Ruth Evans in "Translating Past Cultures?" in *The Medieval Translator IV*, ed. Roger Ellis and Ruth Evans, The University of Exeter Press,

Bassnett-McGuire's *Translation Studies* includes the medieval period as a significant period of translation and recognises the complexity of the role of the translator in the Middle Ages. Moreover, in his division of the history of translation into four periods, George Steiner, in *After Babel*, emphasizes the empirical focus of translation in the Middle Ages. Bassnett and Steiner tend to recognise the strong legacy of translation in the Middle Ages as an outcome of the classical influence and argue that the translational virtues of the Middle Ages should be sought in the medieval practice rather than the theory of translation. Similarly, Louis Kelly's historical account of translation theory, while recognising the evident impact of classical theory of translation in the medieval period, introduces the debate over whether the literal or free approaches to translation should be adopted as the manifest influence of classical translation theory on the Middle Ages (1979: 2, 32-6, 44-5). On the other hand, Rita Copeland, in *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages*, situates medieval translation in the established tradition of classical hermeneutic and rhetorical conventions, while studies on the theory of writing in the Middle Ages reveal that medieval rhetoric and theory play a significant role for translation. These theoretical investigations of translation in the Middle Ages emphasize the irrelevance of observing a distinction between a genuine translation and mere adaptation, for, it is argued, the autonomy of the translator is comparable to that of the writer to create his/her text from the source texts of his/her choice.²

Studies on the theory and practice of medieval translation reveal therefore that the translation principles and the issues of translation theory in the Middle Ages derive from a long established tradition of translation theory developed by the classical authors. In practice, Roger Ellis states, medieval translation is heterogenous; "every instance of practice that we may be tempted to erect into a principle has its answering opposite, sometimes in the same work" (quoted in Evans, 1994: 27). Evidently, not only the critical approaches to translation in the Middle Ages but also theory and practice of translation of the period vary considerably. However, it seems that medieval translation utilises the translation and writing theories inherited from the classical authors to adopt a translational approach that recognises translation's vital role in the cultural transformation of the Middle Ages. This paper argues therefore that the medieval interest in translation can be considered as a cultural and political interest since the

1994. pp. 20-45. See Jeanette Beer, *Medieval Translators and Their Craft*. 1989 and Roger Ellis (ed) assisted by Jocelyn Price, Stephen Medcalf and Peter Meredith. *The Medieval Translator: The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages: Papers Read at a Conference Held 20-23 August 1987 at the University of Wales Conference Centre, Gregynog* //a//. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1989.

² Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*. Cambridge, 1991. See particularly A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scotts (eds) *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-1375 The Commentary Tradition*. Oxford, 1988.

translations of the period are introduced as potential projects for cultural transformation.

The formative role of translation in the Middle Ages can be observed in medieval culture's awareness of the significance of cultural interaction. Medieval culture is a highly bookish culture which contributed to the development of a vigorous translation activity in the Middle Ages. The recognition of the authority of the books seems to have led to the utilisation of the potential in translation for cultural education and transformation. As there was little or no difference between translation and original composition in the Middle Ages, translation was often considered in association with the pragmatic function of the book (Barratt, 1992:13-14). In Geoffrey Chaucer's The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the fictional dialogue concerning the translations of the narrator provides an instructive interaction concerning translation activity as an integral part of cultural re-construction in the Middle Ages. The god of Love presents two works of Chaucer, the *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Romance of the Rose*, as translations and questions the narrator's motives in choosing to translate works undermining the doctrine of Love (322-335). This fictional questioning introduces, in fact, the main attitude to translation in the Middle Ages as it recognises the transformative role of translation on the target audience as an important issue the medieval translator recognises and aims at as the ultimate target of translation. Similarly, the narrator in Chaucer's Prologue to *the Legend of Good Women* argues that he wanted to teach the reader the true conduct in love through the experience of the lovers in the books he translated (471-474).

Basically, the translator in this fictional debate introduces the main objective of translation as making the works of foreign languages available to the linguistically disadvantaged audience for their cultural improvement. This rather pragmatic translational paradigm, moreover, introduces another important issue of medieval translation addressed by theoretical tradition of translation in the Middle Ages. In fact, the translator accused of mistranslation in Chaucer's Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* is also a writer, and his accuser does not make a distinction between his role as a translator and his role as a writer.³ Many of the medieval translators were also writers, and translation and *interpretatio* were considered as important strategies in medieval composition. Moreover, most of the medieval translation activity from Latin into the vernacular involved a transfer of the past works into the vernacular by re-writing. As Douglas Kelly argues, "such re-writing is 'translation' as literary invention, using pre-existent source material. It is a variety of *translatio studii*" (1997: 48). Medieval reception of the translation theory of the classical antiquity as a principle governing creative activity led to a special sense of translation, that is, translation as "an

³ See the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, lines 322-35 and 362-370.

'unfaithful' yet artful interpretation or reinterpretation"(Kelly, 1997: 55), or "secondary translation" to put it in Copeland's words.

Identifying the important status of translation in the Middle Ages as a branch of writing reveals that the Middle Ages was not totally oblivious to the legacy of rhetorical and hermeneutic traditions of the classical antiquity. More importantly, it testifies to the significant function translation is given in the cultural transformation. As stated above, a theoretical understanding of translation in the Middle Ages was largely dependent on the classical ideas of translation. Rita Copeland argues for the necessity of recognising the Medieval awareness of the classical tradition as the strong theoretical foundation of medieval translation:

A theoretical history of translation in the Western Middle Ages cannot be written as if translation represents a semi-autonomous development of stylistics. Considered in this way, medieval vernacular translation is little more than a collection of disparate practices, united by a few inherited commonplaces which center on the distinction between word for word and sense for sense, and useful for diachronic source study, stylistic analysis, or the study of particular literary or historical relationships. But the earliest theories of translation which the Latin West received from Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian did not emerge as critically transparent and historically portable reflections on practice. These theories of translation were formulated at Rome within a certain academic environment and in response to a certain disciplinary agenda" (1991:1).

It is important to note, in this context, that the Roman emphasis on translation is because of its use both as material and method for original composition. Horace's oft-quoted translation principle cautions not the translator per se but particularly the writer who uses translation for creative purposes:

A theme that is familiar can be made your own property as long as you do not waste your time on a hackneyed treatment; nor should you try to render your original word for word like a slavish translator, or in imitating another writer plunge yourself into difficulties from which shame, or the rules you have laid down for yourself, prevent you from extricating yourself (1984:83).

The medieval translator evidently is not oblivious to Horace's compositional concerns. As in the Roman period, in the Middle Ages, too, translation was considered to be a form of writing, often used by the author for creative purposes. Yet, in the Middle Ages, a major aim of poetry was acquiring and disseminating wisdom. Re-telling the old material aimed at a transference not only of the linguistic medium but also at a restructuring of the original. Roger Ellis states that the medieval translator is a composite of the roles of scribe, compiler and author/interpreter (quoted in Evans1994: 28). Chaucer as a poet, for instance, often adopts the "translator's role, the independent writer who has to follow an "original" with fuller authority" (Phillips, 1994: 96).

Because of the complexity of the role of the Medieval author, in the thirteenth century, -heological commentaries employ a series of terms in order to define more precisely the literary activity of an "auctor" and to distinguish the literary activity of an *auctor* from the role of the scribe (*scriptor*), from the role of the compiler (*compilator*) and from that of the commentator (*commentator*) (Minnis, 1988: 94). St Bonaventure, in his discussion of Peter Lombard as an author in his prologue to his commentary on Lombard's *Libri Sententiarum*, identifies four different ways of "making a book" and accords the translator/interpreter a status nearly equal to that of an author:

The method of making a book is fourfold. For someone writes the materials of others, adding or changing nothing, then this person is said to be merely the scribe. Someone else writes the materials of others, adding, but nothing of his own, and this person is said to be the compiler. Somebody writes both the materials of other men, and his own, but the materials of others as the principal materials, as his own annexed for the purpose of clarifying them, and this person is said to be the commentator, not the author. Someone else writes both his own materials and those of others, but his own as the principal materials, and the materials of others annexed for the purpose of confirming his own, and such must be called the author (quoted in Minnis, 1988: 94).

Such a distinction between creativity and adaptation was necessitated by the often overlapping authorial positions of the writer and the translator. Bonaventure's definition of the author clearly states that the author is someone who writes his own materials but who at the same time draws on others for the support of his composition while, conventionally, *interpretatio* was associated with exposition and was seen as a form of exegesis. Thus, the translator was considered to be a mediator between two different cultures or languages. Isidore of Seville proposes *interpretatio* as a form of gloss and he further defines the translator as "Interpretenbecause one is between the parts, midway between two languages, when one translates" (quoted in Copeland, 1991: 90). Accordingly, because of its special status, *interpretatio* was later distinguished from other forms of exposition because *interpretatio* "is a translation from one language into another" (Copeland, 1991: 89).

In 1401, an English writer, Richard Ullertan, in his criticism of a rival writer, emphasises the relation of translation to interpretation and exposition,

....they are called translators who take or apportion out one language to another, or who expound one language by another. And speaking in this way, it is evident that the verb "to translate" is taken to mean "to interpret," that is, to expound one language through another; and "translator" is taken to mean "interpreter". Whence "translators" are called interpreters and vice versa... Thus "interpret" is sometimes taken to mean "expound," "reveal," "explain," or "unlock" the sense hidden in the words" (quoted in Copeland, 1991: 90-91).

Evans argues that "the choices governing acts of translation in the Middle Ages are not purely individual and voluntaristic, nor are they determined by a few translational commonplaces,... but emerge instead as the result of the discursive force of a disciplinary frame"(1994: 29). If we examine the connections of medieval translation with classical theories of translation, it is in this context that the translation theory of the classical and patristic periods had both direct and indirect influence on Medieval English translation (Stanton, 1997: 36). The theoretical continuum from Horace to the Middle Ages can be detected in the distinction made between word-for-word (literal) translation and sense-for-sense (free) translation as one of the main tenets of the translation theory of the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages inherits the classical theory of literal versus free translation via Jerome who establishes sense-for-sense translation as a major translation paradigm except for Scriptural translation which, according to Jerome, requires literal rather than free translation (Stanton, 1997: 36, Copeland, 1991: 42-55). Jerome's translation principles set a precedence for the later translators:

I admit and confess most freely that I have not translated word for word in my translations of Greek texts, but sense for sense, except in the case of the scriptures in which even the order of the words is a mystery. Cicero has been my teacher in this (Lefevere, 1992: 47).

According to Jerome, the translator's task is not to preserve the linguistic idiosyncracies of the source language but to transfer the meaning so as to make sense in the target language. In his defense of sense-for-sense translation, Jerome challenges literal translation to support his thesis in his preface to the *Life of Saint Anthony*:

A literal translation from one language into another obscures the sense in the same way as the thriving weeds smother the seeds....I have skirted this danger and at your request I have translated the life of Saint Anthony in such a way that the whole sense is there, even if I have not always kept to the sound of the words. Let others stick to syllables, or even to letters, you should try to grasp the sense (Lefevere, 1992: 48-49).

Jerome and his followers insist on free translation as a translational paradigm to display a concern with the effect of the translation on the target audience. Jerome's appropriation of Ciceronian dictum about translation proves to be rather useful for the medieval translator's projects of translations from Latin into the vernacular.

The appropriation of the classical theories of translation according to particular cultural and ideological objectives of the translation can be observed in the translations of the great Old English translator King Alfred. King Alfred acknowledges the significance of the classical translation theory when he describes his own method of translation as one that best serves his objectives in his translation of Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis*. King Alfred clearly prioritises sense and meaning when he states that

sometimes word for word sometimes sense for sense can be the best method of translation:

(I translated) sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense, as I learned it from Plegmund my archbishop, and from Asser my bishop, and from Grimbald my mass-priest and from John my mass-priest. After I had mastered it, I translated it into English as best I understood it and as I could most meaningfully render it (Quoted in Stanton, 1997: 38).

Roger Bacon, the English cleric, scientist, mathematician and inventor, approves Jerome's attitude to translation and quotes Jerome as an authority on translation:

Hieronymus [Jerome] states the following in his epistle on the best way to translate: "If anybody thinks a language does not change in translation, let him try to translate Homer literally into Latin. If he then goes on to translate that translation into his own language he will see that the syntax is ridiculous and that the most eloquent of poets is hardly able to speak at all" (Lefevere, 1992: 49).

It is in the prefaces to translations provided by the translators that we come very close to the cultural and ideological import of translation in the Middle Ages. The translation prefaces disclose valuable insights into the workings of the translator's mind and his/her objectives in translation. The particular stress on the uses of translating the sense rather than the word can be observed more clearly in the General Prologue to the Wicliffite Bible (c. 1395) in which John Purvey introduces free translation as the best method of translating from Latin into English:

First it is to knowe that the beste translating is, out of Latyn into English, to translate aftir the sentence and not oneli aftir the wordis, so that the sentence be as opin either openere in English as in latyn, and go not fer fro the lettre; and if the lettre mai not be suid in the translating, let the sentence euere be hool and open, for the wordis owen to seme to the entent and sentence, and ellis the wordis ben superflu either false (quoted in Copeland, 1991: 51).

Purvey's case makes it clear that free translation as the translator's choice is not an entirely individual choice in that it does not follow necessarily from the desire to subscribe to a theoretical position. On the contrary, as John Purvey notes, the preference of a particular translation method over the other is related to the particular cultural or ideological objectives of the translator. In other words, the idea of translation as a cultural, linguistic service to people otherwise unable to access the text has a significant effect on the method of translation. Significantly, Purvey argues for the irrelevance of linguistic equivalence particularly when it fails the communicative objective of translation: "for the wordis owen to seme to the entent and sentence".

In the medieval context, primary translation, or translation proper, concerns the rendition of the mainly Latin texts of foreign language into English and involves

primarily a linguistic transference with considerable concern for the preservation of the "originality" of the original text. Medieval primary translation, therefore, involves translation mainly of Latin and Greek texts, including the Bible, into the vernacular. In fact, it is consequent to certain objectives of the translation from Latin into the vernacular that there developed in the Middle Ages a set of translation principles. Many English translations make a point of stating the cultural benefits of translation from Latin into English. While for Roman translators, translation is primarily a form of exercise in comparative stylistics, King Alfred's campaign for the translation of the Latin texts into the vernacular is, for instance, primarily a part of a cultural recovery project after the Danish invasions and destruction of the country. Accordingly, King Alfred points to the political and cultural objectives of translation and urges to follow the translation policies of Romans and the other nations to realise his cultural objectives.

As the medieval translator works for a cultural project, the interest in other cultures is manifestly an interest in the cultures of superior knowledge and learning. The medieval translator is careful to locate his/her work in the greater project of intellectual and cultural improvement. Consequently, many prefaces to the translated texts strive to construct a legitimate and justifiable position for translation and argue that the transmission of meaning is the most important objective to be realised in translation. Hence, for the medieval translator the translation theory constitutes an interest for its use. As Ellis argues, "translation into the vernacular can be part of a programme of creating national identity., or it can assist powerfully in the creation of a standardised written vernacular" (1991: xv-xvi).

In the Middle Ages, the translator's anxiety about the function of translation is pervasive. It often leads to the use of a simpler, "open" language. In John of Trevisa's the "Dialogue between a Lord and a Clerk upon Translation", for instance, the lord states that the important quality of translation is that, since translation can never be perfect, the translator should aim at "a skilful translation, that might be known and understood" (Trevisa, 1903: 207).

In the Prologue to the Middle English of the text known as the *Knowing of Women's Kind in Childing*, a translation of the Latin work *Cum auctor*, or *Tratula major* by an eleventh or twelfth-century woman doctor of Salerno, Tratula, the translator justifies the translation as a much needed means of educating the people:

And because whomen of oure tonge kunne bettyre rede and undyrstandethys langage than eny other, and every whoman lettyrde [may] rede hit to other unlettryde and helphem and conceyle hem in here maladyes, withowtyn scheuyng here dysese to man, I have thys drauyn and wryttyn in Englysh (Barratt, 1992: 30).

As argued by Evans, the translation here is offered as a cultural bridge between several cultures (1994:33) as it aims to transmit the medical knowledge of the learned and the elite to the lettered and unlettered women of the translator's time. It renders the translation to a pragmatic project as it identifies the target reader as the female population of his/her culture and aims to contribute to their education in medical matters by providing access to the accumulated knowledge on the topic.

A similar concern with the transmission of knowledge through translation can be identified in the translator's prologues to hagiographical writings. As Wogan- Browne states, in these prologues, the clerkly narrator assumes the role of "communicator and officiant mediating between saint, text, and audience: 'to those who have not learnt Latin...clerks must show the faith'" (1994:47). The bid for attention and legitimacy rests heavily on the role and function of the translation, on how the translation serves the target audience. Accordingly, the prologue from the Life of St. Clement endorses the use of translation and its much needed help in the dissemination of knowledge, especially to the lewd people:

.... because there are enough books to suffice for the learned, it would be much better and would turn out to greater profit if the books of antiquity...were turned into a language in which more people could have the benefit of them. I am not one of the learned who are thoroughly grounded in clerisy; nevertheless the little that I know I intend to write to such effect that clerks and lay people who hear it will be well able to understand it (quoted in Wogan-Browne, 1994: 49).

In the same way, Clemence of Barking states her reason for translating *Catherine's Life* as love of the community at Barking and states further the need for a re-translation of the text:

It [the Vita] was translated before, and well set out, according to the standards of the time. But people were not so hard then to please nor so critical as they are at present (and will be even more so after our day). Because times have changed and people's nature has altered, the verse, having become somewhat corrupted, is considered poor. It must therefore be corrected and the times made to conform to the people (quoted in Wogan-Browne, 1994: 51).

The cultural function of translation is the most prominent reason for Bible translation, too, as it has the purpose of spreading the word of God (Bassnett-McGuire, 1987: 45). The first medieval translation of the Bible into English is the Wicliffite Bible produced sometimes between 1380 and 1384. Wycliffe's motive in translating the Bible into English is, however, political. He wanted to enable the English speaking literate people to read and understand the Bible by themselves. This political purpose reflects on the translator's method of translation as well, for Wycliffe wants to make sure that the English Bible is written in clear language to be "open" to all. Thus, as stated above,

Wycliffite Bible sets a precedence for translational methods by adopting as its method the translation of the "sense/meaning" rather than an attempt to translate word for word. Hence, the next attempt at translating the Bible into English in 1525 by William Tyndale follows the precepts established by Wycliffe. Tyndale's translation of the New Testament from Greek and parts of the Old Testament from Hebrew aims to produce as clear a version as possible.

The purpose of serving the audience by facilitating access to *Latinitas* is the stated reason for Richard Rolle's recourse to an eclectic method of translation. His English *Psalter* makes no use of the complex Latin of the original and instead it simplifies linguistic complexities so that those who know no Latin can come to understand what is originally written in Latin. To this end, Rolle states, "In the translacioun .i. folow the lettere als mykyll as .i. may. And thare .i. fynd no propire ynglis .i. folow the wit of the worde, swa that thai that sail red it thaim there noght dred errynge" (1884: 4-5).

Invested with the authority to select the best method to serve his/her objectives, the medieval translator is always in search of what the narrator in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* describes as "and othere bokes tok me....To reede upon" (695). It is clearly a legacy of medieval translation to address the reader and to direct the reader's attention to the particular significance of the translated text. Medieval English translation can be considered as a cultural project which aims to bridge the gap between the learned and the unlearned and increase the general level of learning through a translation of the works of different, often superior, cultures. However, the medieval translator's interest in developing a theory of translation cannot be underestimated for the theory and practice of translation are not mutually exclusive in the Middle Ages. The medieval translator has a clearly identified audience, is confidently knowledgeable about the needs of the target culture, and uses the translation theory for the manifest practical purpose of cultural transformation.

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