THE WOMAN TRANSLATOR IN THE MIDDLE AGES. SELECTED EXAMPLES OF FEMALE TRANSLATION ACTIVITY

Abstract: Translatory achievements of medieval women are rarely discussed. In antiquity, Greek and Roman writings were practically all composed in either of the two languages. Greek dominated, since Latin women’s writing did not reach sophistication, or at least we do not possess proof of it. In the early Middle Ages the situation changed: Latin became dominant, and writing in the vernacular, which included women’s writing, started to be recognized. While scholarly research tended to focus on high-brow, original literature, female literary endeavours were largely disregarded. Translation, a low-brow activity, was not considered original. Comments about it are rather infrequent in early compendia of medieval literature. This absence may be partly explained by the fact that originality itself was not held in high regard in the Middle Ages. Only recently has the growing research into social and legal conditions of early women as well as into their varied cultural and literary expressions brought them a deserved recognition.

Keywords: medieval women translators, vernacular languages, paraphrase, hagiography, chivalric poetry, *Secretum secretorum*, fables, *Fürstenspiegel*, Marie de France, Clemence of Barking, Hiltgart von Hürnheim, Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, Eleanor of Scotland, Archduchess of Austria

The aim of this paper is simple: to sketch the problem of translatory interests and achievements of medieval women writers who belonged in the European culture. So far this topic has not been properly discussed or even noticed by historians. In Greco-Roman world, female translation did not exist, as practically all literature available for research now was written in either Greek or Latin. Since women’s writing was weakly developed in Latin, or at least little of it has survived to our times, Greek was the only
language that mattered. In the early Middle Ages the situation changed: in the West, Latin was the dominant language while Greek became nearly forgotten, and in the Greek East, women’s writing was barely alive. From the general European point of view, the exceptions such as the literatures of the Celtic (especially Welsh and Irish), Anglo-Saxon, Nordic (Scandinavian), and – to a certain extent – also the Old Church Slavonic cultures remained marginal, even though they did exert some influence on the ideas and literature of the European “core.” All the same, in those literatures women’s writing was, as far as we know, very rare. In the 11th century, and especially in the 12th century, when intellectual life flourished (the Renaissance of the 12th century), vernacular languages entered literature and writing not only proliferated, but also diversified linguistically. Next to literature composed in Latin, there appeared works written in such languages and dialects\(^1\) as Old German, Provençal, Anglo-Norman and Old Spanish (much later also Slavonic languages). It offered greater possibilities to women’s writing.

Although in the early Middle Ages women were occasionally better educated than men, normally they could not profit from systematic studies. Such education was only possible at the courts of enlightened kings and queens, and to a lesser extent also in aristocratic residences and in the more privileged convents of the “Imperial abbeys” in East Francia (i.e. in Germany) of the 10th and 11th century, under the Saxon (Liudolfing) and Salian dynasties. The literary talent of women could best be noticed in areas that did not require the regular “academic” training. Moreover, the recognition of vernacular languages, which, unlike Latin, did not have to be learnt from scratch, gave women the opportunity to create literature. They could express themselves in poetry and other lyrical writings as well as in epistolography, hagiography, mystical and typically pragmatic (e.g. medical or paramedic) literature; it was harder to do so in theology, philosophy, historiography and the seven liberal arts. However, if one wanted to reach wider circles, not limited by a language, one still had to write in Latin – and it remained so for the next few centuries.

While the literary research used to focus mainly on the “high-brow” literary mainstream, and the basic criterion of assessment was originality, the more marginal literary phenomena were either completely disregarded or received perfunctory treatment, unless the object of research was someone outstanding (such as Marie de France, discussed below). Of course, inter-

---

\(^1\) I do not aspire to the correctness in the complex nomenclature of these languages.
lingual translation did not partake of thus defined originality; that is why early compendia of medieval literature tell us very little on the subject. It was not acknowledged that the Middle Ages did not rate originality very high. Only in recent times, marked by the rapid development of worldwide research on social and legal conditions of women and their various forms of cultural (and literary) expression, have those “margins” of literature been given the attention they merit.

The topic would require an extensive presentation, but for the purposes of this paper a few examples must suffice. In the light of what was said above, it will only be right to begin with the 12th century. The mysterious Marie de France (Mary of France), a figure hard to pin down historically, lived and wrote within the splendid Anglo-Norman culture most probably in the second half of the 12th century. She was a sophisticated poet and writer, conscious of her own talent, and – contrary to many other ladies (and men) of letters – she had no intention of remaining anonymous or hiding her identity behind a *nom de plume* (*Me numerai pur remembrance: / Marie ai num, si sui de France*, “I shall name myself for posterity: Marie is my name, and I am from France”2). She earned her prominent position in the history of medieval literature mainly thanks to twelve *Lais* (“tales, songs”), which were translated into European languages (including Polish) in modern times. She is also known as the author of a volume of fables entitled *Ysopet*, written between 1170 and 1180, comprising 102 verse fables of varied length (mostly quite short), plus the prologue and epilogue. Marie herself claimed to have based her fables on an English version of Aesop’s Fables, *Esope*, allegedly translated by King Alfred the Great (9th century) from a Latin version derived, in turn, from the Greek original. We will not go into details of the highly uncertain academic discussion of the sources of Marie de France’s *Ysopet*. Suffice it to say that in the Middle Ages the name of Aesop, referring to the half-legendary Greek writer of the Antiquity (dated ca. 6th century BC), was attributed to a number of various versions and adaptations of a volume of fables dated back to Late Antiquity and associated with the somewhat obscure figure of Romulus. Supposedly these fables are prose adaptations of Phaedrus (a fabulist living at the turn of the eras). Marie de France’s fables are the oldest extant volume of this kind written in the vernacular. Despite the fundamental differences in form and content, they share one important characteristic with her *Lais*, namely, the

humanistic interest in human affairs, both from the individual and social point of view. No matter if we portray her as a lady in waiting at the court of Henry II or Eleanor of Aquitaine or as the superior of a convent of nuns, Marie de France was a keen observer, deeply interested in the humankind.

When it comes to the third, and the latest, work by Marie de France, *L’Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* (The Legend of the Purgatory of Saint Patrick), the source is not difficult to establish. This 2302-line long poem is a verse translation of the Latin *Tractatus de purgatorio Sancti Patricii* by somewhat obscure H[enry?] of Saltrey. However, while H. of Saltrey’s text was widely known and frequently copied, only one copy of Marie de France’s paraphrase has survived to our times. It is now housed at the National Library of France in Paris.

As Jacques Le Goff,\(^3\) an eminent French medievalist, demonstrates, the 12th century played a significant role in shaping the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory (which, as Roman Catholic theologians themselves admit, lacked foundation in the Holy Bible). Since the “traditional” spheres of the other world, i.e. heaven and hell, were not treated comprehensively by the biblical canon either, it is not surprising that people, in their curiosity, searched for answers to the most intriguing questions, including those about the localisation and “geography” of purgatory, and of course about the nature, severity and duration of the purgatorial punishments. The Irish knight Owein supposedly narrated his journey to Saint Patrick’s Purgatory in Lough Derg (today County Donegal, North-West Ireland), where the entrance to purgatory was to be located. His gruesome and tremendous experiences served as the subject of H. de Saltrey’s Latin treatise and its poetic paraphrase by Marie de France.

As we will learn below, it is quite probable that Marie de France was the author of one more literary work: *La Vie Seinte Audree* (*The Life of Saint Audrey*).

It is no coincidence that over the 12th and 13th centuries Anglo-Norman culture produced a small but interesting group of hagiographies devoted to lives of saintly women and written by women. These were not original works, but vernacular adaptations of earlier Latin originals. One Clemence of Barking used available Latin versions to produce her own life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria (who died in martyrdom in the early 4th century).

---