

The Role of Translation in Medieval Spanish and Catalan Literature

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It would be presumptuous of me to try to delineate the role of translation in medieval Spain in such a brief essay as follows. That task is part of a future study in my ongoing research of different aspects of translation in the Middle Ages that, by its very nature, would entail some comparative studies of other European authors and their literary works. My purpose here, therefore, is to open some discussion on the methodology of studying translated works and to place importance on the role of translation in a literary history of Spain.¹

Most studies which focus on translation activities in medieval Spain naturally begin with the Toledo School of translators which was supposedly initiated under the patronage of Archbishop Raymond (1125-52) in the twelfth century. But it is the consequent massive translatorial undertakings that occurred during the reign of Alfonso X the Wise (1252-75) that give testimony to translation as one of the most vital elements of thirteenth-century Spanish culture. In brief, a tradition of translation in Spain exists from the very beginnings of the Spanish language itself.

¹ My future study takes a broader focus —not only literary translations, but translations of more technical texts, such as medicine, and their importance to learning during the Middle Ages.

What approaches have been taken in translation studies in medieval Spain? First, as to be expected, are those which name the translators -when known-, the translations, and the "fidelity" of the translations. Medieval translations cannot be judged in the same light as we judge translation in the twentieth century. Today's emphasis is often placed on "fidelity" or "equivalence" in translating. Early translation theories focused on a tradition of literal over figural meaning. Each translation of a medieval work must be considered individually, especially in view of the relationship between the source text and the target text. Of prime importance is the "degree" of translation. That is, medieval texts can range from almost perfect renderings, to adaptations, recastings, updatings, etc. The translator could choose to be as faithful to the original as he wanted to, or he may have chosen to add or delete certain parts. We must always take into consideration the "translation context" in which the translator worked. For example, a translator of a scientific or medical work was often anonymous and because of the nature of the text, tended to acknowledge as well as respect the authority of the source text(s). This type of translator fulfilled a service role and references to the source(s) were more important than the mention of his own name (Beer 2). In literary undertakings the translator often worked more freely and he could choose to use his sources with more creative liberties (Beer 4).²

Second, translation studies focus on the philological aspect, the development of a language. An examination of translations in Spain from the earliest vernacular translations of Latin texts and mutual translations of vernacular texts sheds light on semantic and dialectal developments. The study of multiple translations of the same text yields invaluable contributions to lexicography.³ A history of the language has been done through studies of translations and confirm that it is in a translation that a text becomes a vehicle for the becoming of language (Johnston 42).

Third, and in my opinion the most revealing, is the socio-cultural phenomenon of translation, or those which deal with cultural concerns and social attitudes. In Spain, translation led to the predominance of the Castilian language not only as a spoken dialect, but also as the written

2 Two important studies that show the realm of ideas for translation, adaptation, recasting, etc. are Kelly and Dembowski.

3 See Ardemagni's study of the translations of *Celestina*.

language of laws and politics. A socio-cultural study of twelfth-century translatorial activities in Spain, for example, shows the importance of two fields. First were the translation of religious texts, work which was carried out primarily in the monasteries. Through the translated texts we can establish the spirituality of a people who kept abreast of current religious literature and develop a sociology of religion as it goes from the elite few who were able to read Latin, to the education of the popular masses by the development of religious works in the vernacular. Another field of concentration was on science, medicine, mathematics, astronomy and astrology, as translators branched out from Latin works to include works from Greek, Arabic and Hebrew. A perusal of the works translated can help us to develop an internationally-intellectual society developing in Spain in these highly technical fields.

The translators of Toledo undoubtedly took the very first steps towards standardizing the Castilian language. Furthermore, the choice not of Latin, but of Castilian to translate from foreign texts in the thirteenth century can be seen as an effort of creating a national identity (Ellis xv). It is also in the field of literary activity, that we can trace a sociology of translation in medieval and Renaissance Spain, as the imaginative literature and their translated texts define the literary polysystem of Spain.⁴

The idea of the strength of a language can be seen in the early poetry of Spain. Castilian poets used Galician for lyric poetry, and Provençal poetry was the instrument of expression among medieval Catalonia poets. These parallel developments represent an adoption of a foreign language as a means of setting poetic expression apart from the everyday language (Roca-Pons 18). Writers, however, begin to recognize the importance of language for daily use and begin to write "en romance." The thirteenth-century poet Gonzalo de Berceo writes in his *Vida de Santo Domingo de Silos*:

4 Itamar Evan-Zohar states that "translated literature" denotes a body of texts which is structured and functions as a system (118).

Quiero fer una prosa en román paladino
En qual suele el pueblo hablar á su vecino. (2ab)
(Ed. Dutton)⁵

Berceo was a prolific translator, and a look at his works alone show the importance than translation played in the development of early literature in Spain. Many major European literary works were translated into other languages, and often it was the "translation" that created a literary impact or lead critics years later to posit lost manuscripts. Fernando de Rojas' *Celestina*, for example, is considered to be one of medieval Spain's literary masterpieces. The original version from the fifteenth century was a novel-dialogue in 16 acts. The later version of 21 acts, interestingly enough, came to light in the Italian translation of 1506, which is a translation of the lost 1504 Castilian text.

The progression of this essay so far has been to show the early translations, those exclusively from Latin, then the encompassing of Greek, Arabic and Hebrew. The next step of translation in Spain was the reworkings of other European literatures. Finally I would like to focus on the translation of Castilian and Catalan. In the case of Spain, there has always been the existence of a conflict (for lack of a better term) between the two predominant languages: Castilian and Catalan. The strong translation movement of the Toledan School emphasized Castilian as the target language. Any and all texts were translated into Castilian, but the primary focus was on service texts as opposed to literary works. As Blodgett has stated, "Translation into only one language is an intent to reduce the subordinate language so that those who use it perceive it as a dialect and eventually give up using it as an effective mode of communication (21)." Castilian eventually won out as the main language of communication and of written works.

A national literature establishes itself early in Castilian, but a history of early Catalan literature shows that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, known as the pre-Renaissance period, are extremely important to the development of Catalan as a means of expression for all literary genres

5 Nancy Vine Durling, working with medieval French texts, has pointed out that the following definitions of "en romanz" existed in the Middle Ages: (1) writings in the vernacular, (2) translations into the vernacular, and (3) the vernacular genre. It is interesting to note that the use of the verb *translater* was rare in early vernacular texts, and that the expression *en romanz* referred to the practice of translation ("Translation and Innovation in the *Roman de Brut*." Beer 13-14).

throughout the territories of the House of Aragon. Many of the authors from this period, such as Bernat Metge, Jordi de Sant Jordi, Ausias March, Jaume Roig and Joanot Martorell, were well-known to a Castilian-reading public. In the sixteenth century when Catalan literature fell into a period of decadence, the major works of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were kept alive through Castilian translations and the Catalan authors are therefore given the recognition that they deserved.

One literary genre common to both Castilian and Catalan, the chivalric novels, uses translation as a theme. This *tópico* has a dual function, interestingly enough, of an opposite character. In these works the author claims to have translated his work from another, and in most cases refers to some exotic oriental source. In this case, the reference to the original work can be seen as a dependence on the source text to lend authority to the vernacular work. On the other hand, this fictional translation illustrates subordinate relationships (Blodgett 21). Joanot Martorell, for example, in *Tirant lo Blanc*, states, "...m'atreviré expondre, no solment de llengua anglesa en portuguesa, mas encara de portuguesa en vulgar valenciana (Riquer ed. 113-14)." Martorell appears to indicate that "vulgar valenciana" is a language of limited use and a lesser form of communication. He does not, however, subordinate it to Castilian.

Ironically enough, it is Miguel de Cervantes' masterpiece, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, which immortalizes *Tirant lo Blanc*. In Part I, Chapter 6 of the work many chivalric romances are criticized. *Tirant*, however, is praised.

— Várame Dios!— dijo el cura, dando una gran voz.
— Que aquí esté Tirante el Blanco! Dádmeme acá, compadre; que hago cuenta que he hallado en él un tesoro de contento y una mina de pastiempos. ...es éste el mejor libro del mundo (Riquer ed. 72).

Tirant lo Blanc was first published in Valencia in 1490. The second edition of 1497 was translated into Castilian and printed in Valladolid in 1511. This translation, however, was published without the name of the translator, nowhere does it indicate that the author is Joanot Martorell, nor does it say that it was a translation of another work. It also does not include the dedicatory of Martorell to Prince Ferrando of Portugal. The

Castilian *Tirante* appeared as an anonymous work, and it is this version that must have been known to Cervantes (Riquer ed. *Tirante* LXXXIV).⁶ In his work Cervantes criticizes translation “como quien mira los tapices flamencos por el revés” (Cervantes Saavedra 998). Cervantes may have not known the source text, the production, but rather the translation or reproduction of *Tirant*.

Other comparisons of Catalan works translated in Castilian might show unique situations as the one just mentioned, but of equal importance here is to develop a sociological study of the period to decide what created a literary market for works translated from Catalan into Castilian and from Castilian into Catalan. A history of reception based on the works translated might further our knowledge of Spain’s literary traditions. Only by including a study of translations will a history of Spain’s literary polysystem be complete.

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6 Riquer’s edition of the Castilian translation gives specifics of the “fidelity” of the translation to the source text.

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