

Sif Ríkharðsdóttir. 2014. *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: The Movement of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia*. Cambridge: Brewer. 211 pages. ISBN: 978-1-84384-289-7.

This work presents a significant contribution to the dialogue involving early translations of medieval French Romance literature. Sif Ríkharðsdóttir's recent monograph includes an insight into the transmission of this genre to Scandinavia as well as to England in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English. Although it is not difficult to find scholarly monographs dedicated to English translations of French romance, Ríkharðsdóttir makes a valuable addition to this body of scholarship by adding for comparison the Old Norse tradition. Additionally, Old Norse scholarship benefits from this broader perspective. Ríkharðsdóttir works from a basis of cultural exchange between textual communities, and she makes good use of the multiplicity of these communities within the same discursive field of Old French romance.

In the Introduction, the main concepts utilized throughout the book are brought forth. Borrowing from Rita Copeland's ideas of textual appropriation from Latin to the vernacular (1991), Ríkharðsdóttir posits a similar result at work between the French and the local languages into which these texts are translated. French was a culturally and politically dominant language at the time, and so these translations are formed through a similar process as from Latin. Another prominent theoretical framework that serves as part of the backbone of this work is that of Brian Stock, regarding the group that forms a textual community (1990). Ríkharðsdóttir extends these ideas about readers and audiences to the person or persons creating the impetus for the translation, further copying, and preservation. Furthermore, the goal when comparing both the English and the Norse translations from French is to differentiate between the original and the target public of a text. She asserts that the differences provide evidence of the shift in authorial objective between sources and their translations.

In Chapter 1, "The Imperial Implications of Medieval Translations: Textual Transmission of Marie de France's *Lais*," postcolonial theory is drawn upon to contrast the differences between an Anglo-Norman rendering of the text with the Old Norse. Ríkharðsdóttir shows how the imperial culture of the French dominated the marginal culture of Norway by way of appearing superior through widespread usage. Ríkharðsdóttir finds that the Old Norse *Strengleikar* make a great attempt at reproducing the original despite the language difficulties. The Norwegian court was displaced from the French, but the intentions and types of audiences were similar. Ríkharðsdóttir argues for a contrast in the narrative voice of the Old Norse. In *Guimars lið*, for example, Marie's voice is feminine and contends with the canon of secular authority, whereas the Old Norse assumes a depersonalized voice that maintains its authority through the wisdom of learned

men. Although the Anglo-Norman *Lay le Freine* is still attached to a courtly audience and repeatedly gives credence to a French original, Ríkharðsdóttir sees the Anglo-Norman as having a dissident nature since the story is moved geographically from France to England.

In Chapter 2, “Behavioural Transformations in the Old Norse Version of *La Chanson de Roland*,” differences in gender values begin to appear predominant. The main source for the Old Norse *Rúnzivals þáttur* is an Anglo-Norman text. This episode forms a part of *Karlamagnús saga*, which draws on multiple sources, the most common being the Old French *chanson de geste*. Ríkharðsdóttir treats the differences in the Old Norse and Anglo-Norman traditions from the perspective of emotion. Ríkharðsdóttir also remarks at the end of this chapter that *Karlamagnús saga* was more popular than the *Strengleikar* based on the number of extant manuscripts and the influence the texts had on the native traditions. The *Lais* of Marie de France were not as well suited as the *chanson de geste* to the Norse traditions of masculine heroism.

Chapter 3, “Narrative Transformations in the Old Norse and Middle English Versions of *Le Chevalier au Lion* (or *Yvain*),” makes a clear rebuttal to prior scholarship in English translation. Ríkharðsdóttir rejects the idea that these translations are any less worthy of inspection because of the changes made by the translator, which led many prior scholars to consider them inferior works. She makes it clear that there is a difference of perspective within separate and distinguishable reading communities, and that these works should not be viewed simply as higher or lower art forms. In both the Norse and Middle English spheres, Ríkharðsdóttir explores the fact that the courtly romance moves from a psychological inner stance to a social outward stance. Rather than explicating the role of the individual and his feelings, the story revolves around the social implications of behavioural roles. The Norse redaction in particular is preoccupied with gender values.

Chapter 4, “Female Sovereignty and Male Authority in the Old Norse and Middle English Versions of *Partonopeu de Blois*,” examines the treatment of gender roles in these texts. The larger contrast appears here with *Partalopa saga*, as the tradition now begins to resemble the maiden king sagas. The extant texts of the Norse are only to be found in Icelandic sources from the fourteenth up to the seventeenth century, unlike other romances that are understood to be Norwegian in origin. In accordance with the native tradition of the maiden king, Partalopi must show his fearlessness to win over Lady Marmoria, proving his ability to lead just as well or better than she. This is in contrast to the original French in which Partonopeu begs Lady Melior for mercy. She pities him, and relents to his demands of courtship. The French version treats the female protagonist derisively, while the English tends toward a less scornful model, but the Old Norse clearly treats the female role in a far more respectful light, able to take on the masculine model

of authority without becoming demonized. She marries Partalopi at the end, and it is said that they rule together.

In this book there is a lack of consideration for the possibility of Icelandic export of original translations. Ríkharðsdóttir maintains that Icelanders merely imported and copied chivalric sagas, which is supported by the fact that Hákon Hákonarson was the one to commission many of these works; moreover, a number of the earliest were clearly of Norwegian origins. However, she leaves small clues that are seemingly arranged to allow the reader to imagine that Icelandic scribes had more to do with the tradition from the start, especially in the last chapter. In the end, she makes no clear commitment to such a line of reasoning, but the reader is left wondering if beyond the surface there is a glimmer of such an opinion.

Ríkharðsdóttir certainly does not oversimplify the complexity of cultural transmission shown from the works inspected. In her conclusion she reengages with post-colonial theory and stresses that there is an ongoing movement between contact and engagement of either group involved. The work is an excellent read and worth inspection by not only Old Norse scholars but those interested in Anglo-Norman and Middle English literature, allowing all of these fields to benefit from the comparative approach applied to the cultural discourse involved in the translation of a variety of forms of Old French romance.

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