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### Modern Theoretical Approaches to Medieval Translation

Michelle Warren

*Dartmouth College*, [michelle.r.warren@dartmouth.edu](mailto:michelle.r.warren@dartmouth.edu)

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# A COMPANION TO MEDIEVAL TRANSLATION

Edited by

**JEANETTE BEER**

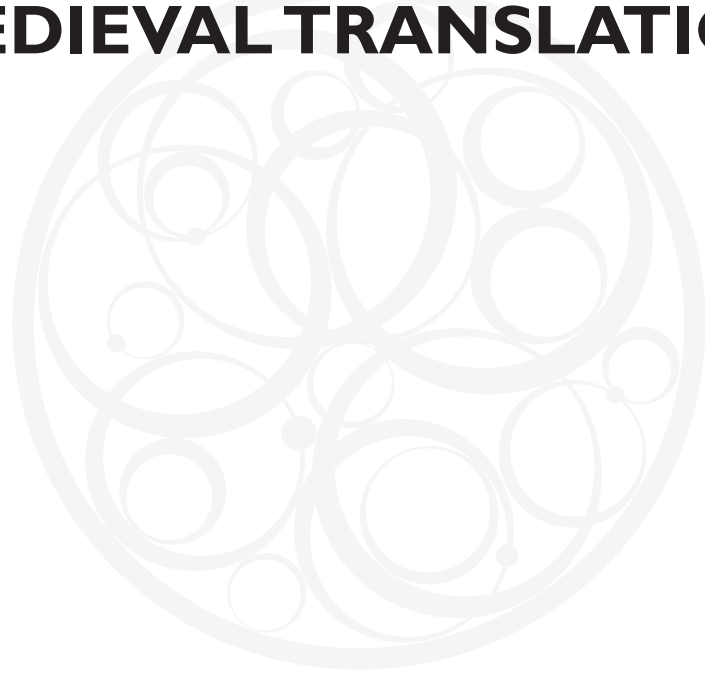


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## MODERN THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO MEDIEVAL TRANSLATION

MICHELLE R. WARREN

This chapter explores some of the ways in which modern literary theory opens insights into medieval European translations. Rather than drawing a distinction between theoretical approaches that apply to medieval studies and those that do not, I will explore a few examples that might in turn inspire readers to their own insights. It is my hope that over time readers of this *Companion to Medieval Translation* will posit many more modern theoretical approaches to medieval translation than can be suggested here. We might even imagine that some of the particularities of medieval European theories of translation could themselves be codified as approaches to texts from other times and places. It is the nature of theory, after all, to exceed its context. Connections grow by analogy across times, places, and cultures. In keeping with this volume's focus, my comments are primarily addressed to Latinate and Germanic languages, although some aspects may apply to other language groups (and Arabic should certainly be included among the medieval European languages).

With these premises in mind, I turned to several relatively recent guides to translation studies to assess how they characterize medieval studies and how they define theoretical approaches. On the first count, medievalists will not be surprised to learn that the codified discipline of translation studies remains oriented primarily toward contemporary contexts. For example, neither *Critical Readings in Translation Studies* (2010) nor *The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies* (2013) address medieval topics.<sup>1</sup> *A Companion to Translation Studies* (2014) does touch on premodern contexts, seemingly because its broader global scope brought attention

to Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese.<sup>2</sup> In these cases, the modern languages are treated as more closely tied to their older forms than Latinate and Germanic languages (with the notable exception of an essay by Kathleen Davis on Old English). The pervasive presentism of these collections underscores both the need for the present volume and the potential for medieval studies to broaden the discipline of translation studies.

Theory is one way to build this two-way street. And translation studies collections provide many roadmaps, with extensive and varied discussions of modern theory. The references are too numerous to summarize usefully, ranging from philosophy to sociology and psycholinguistics. Suffice it to say that, broadly speaking, theory displaces binary hierarchies and fixed categories with an array of supple relationships among texts. If, in traditional paradigms, source texts are originals that have priority over their derivative translations, modern theory conceptualizes translations that have their own independent value. If, in traditional paradigms, authors have priority over translators, modern theory problematizes intention, agency, and subjectivity in ways that unravel both the author's authority and the translator's dependence. If, in traditional paradigms, translators must choose between "sense-for-sense" and "word-for-word" renderings, modern theory shows their mutual entanglements. In all these ways, modern theory challenges basic assumptions about textual relations, with broad repercussions for how translation intersects with power, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, and other aspects of culture.

Somewhat counterintuitively, modern theory's challenges to traditional paradigms can help medievalists develop approaches to translation that are finely tuned to historical particularities. When sources are often unknown, authorship unclear, and languages themselves in flux, theories that resist stability and knowability are "historically accurate." When Edwin Gentzler asks, for example, "What is it like to

<sup>1</sup> Baker, *Critical Readings*; Millán and Bartrina, *The Routledge Handbook*.

<sup>2</sup> Bermann and Porter, *A Companion to Translation Studies*, pp. 191–203, 204–16, 504–15.

think of translation without a native language or homeland?"<sup>3</sup> he refers to the twenty-first century but also accidentally describes common medieval circumstances. Modern theory thus helps us recognize the variable relationships between historical and present social formations. Rather than bringing deforming biases to the past, such theories can help identify those biases and mitigate their effects. Modern theory thus draws us closer to medieval Europe by helping us to distinguish between the aspects of translation that inhere in language per se and those that are conditioned by context. When we can pinpoint the nature of historical difference, we can also discover commonalities that keep the medieval from receding irretrievably into the past. These discoveries will keep students and scholars reading and making translations of medieval texts for many generations to come.

Medievalists have been engaging with modern theory for as long as there has been modern theory. The recent collection edited by Emma Campbell and Robert Mills, *Rethinking Medieval Translation: Ethics, Politics, Theory* (2012), provides a useful snapshot of some of this work. Campbell and Mills address medieval topics with modern theorists while also seeking "to demonstrate how contemporary reflections on the ethics and politics of translation may need to be reconfigured or reframed when applied to medieval examples."<sup>4</sup> They rightly affirm that "an ethics of translation that is self-reflexive about its past and about the modernist assumptions on which it has sometimes relied" needs both theory and the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> Campbell and Mills cast the ethical turn as an extension or refinement of postcolonial discourse analysis, itself one of the logical outcomes of post-structuralism (with its contestation of fixed hierarchies and stable meanings). Ethics is in fact one of the "future challenges" for translation studies overall, according to the recent guides.<sup>6</sup> And so the essays gathered by Campbell and Mills are at the forefront of both medieval translation studies and translation studies per se.

In their dialogue with theory, Campbell and Mills refer primarily to three authors: Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Lawrence Venuti. These thinkers can serve as shortcuts into some of the issues that characterize modern theoretical approaches. Each has been broadly influential across different strands of translation theory as well as regularly referenced

within medieval studies. In fact, they are the only theorists cited repeatedly across the essays in *Rethinking Medieval Translation*. They also form a significant chain of mutual reference: Venuti begins his edited volume of translation theory with Benjamin and has also translated a lecture by Derrida; one of Derrida's most significant engagements with translation includes an exegesis of Benjamin. Each in turn has been drawn into so many theoretical discussions that they can lead us almost anywhere—from political philosophy to postcolonial studies to queer theory.

### Three (or Four) Signposts

Benjamin is ubiquitous in translation studies due to his essay, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (1923). The essay served originally as a prologue to Benjamin's German translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*. As a translator's prologue that has taken on a life of its own, Benjamin's essay reminds us that medieval prologues can also serve as more than descriptions of the texts they preface. Like Benjamin's essay, they can be treated as autonomous theoretical statements with broader implications for other texts, including those in other languages, genres, and even time periods.

Perhaps the primary reason that Benjamin commands medievalists' attention is the essay's last sentence: "The interlinear version of the holy scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation."<sup>7</sup> Interlinear translation and gloss (the distinction itself raises a host of theoretical questions) are defining features of many medieval books, not just scriptures. For Benjamin, this mode represents the ideal because it performs his claim that the "truth" of a text emerges from the original and the translation together (rather than residing solely in the original, only partly extracted in the translation). The translator's task is to release this "kernel of pure language"<sup>8</sup> that conjoins and transcends both versions. Scripture, with its referent to a single unified truth, is only the most extreme example of this relationship. The religious analogy suggests the special import of Benjamin's theories for any medieval text inflected with religious imagery or function. Indeed, Campbell and Mills suggest that religious texts may be one of the most significant areas for active negotiation between modern theory and medieval translation.<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin's interlinear model is taken up by Simon Gaunt to assess modern translations of medieval texts. These texts are

<sup>3</sup> Gentzler, *Translation and Rewriting*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell and Mills, *Rethinking Medieval Translation*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell and Mills, *Rethinking Medieval Translation*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Van Wyke, "Translation and Ethics"; Baker, "The Changing Landscape," p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Rendall, "The Translator's Task," p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> Rendall, "The Translator's Task," p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell and Mills, *Rethinking Medieval Translation*, pp. 7–8.

fundamental to teaching—and thus formative of every medievalist in some fashion (we all started somewhere, as I have pointed out elsewhere<sup>10</sup>). Gaunt argues that the advantages brought by ease of access can also bring disadvantages, as the medieval text itself becomes superfluous. He suggests, for example, that the translations in the French series *Lettres gothiques* provide such smooth reading experiences that the left-hand page of medieval French can be entirely ignored. He proposes replacing facing page layouts with interlinear translations in order to maintain the interdependence of the two texts, forcing us “to look directly at the source text.”<sup>11</sup> Gaunt’s practical proposal, combined with Benjamin’s theory of the interlinear, might disrupt the negative connotations that interlinear translations often have in the pedagogical context. For example, on the website *Interlinear Translations of Some of The Canterbury Tales*, the modern English translations are cast as “merely a pony and by no means can they serve as a substitute for the original, nor even for a good translation.” Here, the modern translation is barely given the status of a text. In light of Benjamin’s theory, however, the modern English text becomes integral to the “kernel of pure language” at the heart of Chaucer’s expression. Finally, it is significant that the translations that follow Benjamin’s preface are neither interlinear nor facing page. Instead, a French poem is printed on the verso with the corresponding German translation on the recto; longer poems appear in their entirety across two or more pages. With the simultaneous view of source and target always impossible, the book stands as a material intervention in translation theory on par with the preface.

The symbiotic relationship between source and translation in Benjamin’s theory means that translation affects both the original language and the target language. Benjamin gives the translation agency, stating at one point: “the original is changed.”<sup>12</sup> Benjamin’s metaphor for this mutual transformation is a broken vessel that can be reassembled: original and translation are “fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language”; the pieces must “correspond to each other in the tiniest details but need not resemble each other.”<sup>13</sup> The vessel metaphor is doubly significant for medieval languages that are not fixed in their forms: the edges of the fragments are themselves in flux, amplifying the agency of translation.

In medieval-to-medieval translation, languages are literally forming each other. In medieval-to-modern translation, our modern tongues are re-releasing and re-configuring their relations with history. Both processes are affected by the ways in which translation itself serves as a metaphor for transparency, as Zrinka Stahuljak has shown, drawing on Benjamin.<sup>14</sup>

Fittingly, the translation of Benjamin’s essay has broadly determined the meaning of the “original.” The English rendition by Harry Zohn (1968) and the French one by Maurice de Gandillac (1971) have both greatly influenced modern theory. Both, moreover, have recently been the subject of reception studies, including new translations in both languages.<sup>15</sup> This multiplicity of versions echoes the textual conditions medievalists often encounter. Just like many medieval texts, modern theory comes to us freighted with linguistic variability, interpretative reception, and recensions. Medievalists are well equipped to take account of the *mouvance* at the heart of modern theory, where language- and nation-specific translations have shaped divergent conceptual norms, all attributed to the same “author.” Theory’s transmission through translation is an eminently medieval topic.

Benjamin’s afterlives lead straight to the second ubiquitous essay at the intersection of modern theory and medieval translation, Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel.” Like Benjamin, Derrida has written a translator’s prologue, only in this case to someone else’s translation—Maurice de Gandillac’s French translation of Benjamin’s German essay. This misdirection plunges us into the slippery turns of Derrida’s theories of language. Everything about his engagement with Benjamin performs his central claim that it is impossible to “give back” meaning through translation. First, without yet naming “La tâche du traducteur,” Derrida avers that his theme should have led him “elsewhere,” to a different essay by Benjamin, but that he found this one “better centered around its theme.”<sup>16</sup> Of course, this is a joke, since Derrida’s discussion of Babel has already dismantled the concept of centring. The feint continues as Derrida states that he will refer to Gandillac’s French translation, yet begins the next sentence with the first word of the German title, *Aufgabe*. The analysis that extends over the following pages is liberally sprinkled with German words, including insertions within direct quotes from the French translation.

<sup>10</sup> Warren, “Translation,” pp. 65–66.

<sup>11</sup> Gaunt, “Untranslatable,” pp. 254–55.

<sup>12</sup> Rendall, “The Translator’s Task,” p. 155.

<sup>13</sup> Rendall, “The Translator’s Task,” p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Stahuljak, “Epistemology of Tension.”

<sup>15</sup> Nouss, *Walter Benjamin’s Essay*.

<sup>16</sup> Graham, “Des Tours de Babel,” p. 175.

These insertions belie the claim to a single source. In this way, they perform two of Derrida's signature concepts, *différance* and *supplément*, which together render "the original" unthinkable. Translation becomes both impossible (to the extent that it requires an original text to be translated) and absolutely necessary (to the extent that meaning is always deferred). One is put in mind of medieval translators' prologues that refer to non-existent sources.<sup>17</sup>

The self-cancelling duality that Derrida identifies with, and within, translation finds its original expression in the myth of Babel. Derrida characterizes Babel as always already fractured into multiplicity, making it a "the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on."<sup>18</sup> In addition to encapsulating Derrida's impossible aporia of language, Babel refers us once again to scripture, keeping the sacred at the centre of the drama of translation: "The sacred and the being-to-be-translated [*l'être-à-traduire*] do not lend themselves to thought one without the other."<sup>19</sup> In the conflation of the "letter" with "being" (the homophones *l'être*, *lettre*), translation touches on fundamental questions of existence. This mode of reading, moreover, is familiarly medieval. As Miranda Griffin has pointed out, Derrida uses a "messianic idiom of anticipation, annunciation, and revelation."<sup>20</sup> Griffin demonstrates a parallel between how Derrida reads translation into Babel and how the *Ovide moralisé* reads Christianity into a Roman text: Derrida's method illustrates a "thoroughly medieval reading practice to detect in earlier texts ideas which are revealed by later ones."<sup>21</sup> Here again, the medieval is always already in modern theory and theory is always already in the medieval.

Alongside myth, Derrida elaborates on metaphor, building on Benjamin's images while also warping them in new directions. Benjamin, for example, introduces the metaphor of translation as a royal mantle enveloping its content, by which he illustrates his idea that translation can elevate the status of the original without deforming its meaning.<sup>22</sup> From this image, Derrida imagines an elaborate political economy: the mantle (or cape), to be royal, must surround a king's body, which to be royal must be married, which requires a promise of marriage,

a bride's wedding gown, a sacred oath, and an intact hymen.<sup>23</sup> This extended scenario goes beyond metaphor to allegory, which Griffin associates with the medieval veil of allegory.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the translation operates a mystical heterosexual intercourse, an encounter that performs the marriage promise while leaving the original more virgin than before.<sup>25</sup> At the end of this allegory, Derrida reminds us that he is reading Benjamin in translation: "More or less faithfully I have taken some liberty with the tenor of the original ... I have added another cape, floating even more."<sup>26</sup> This tongue-twisting conclusion grants us the freedom to mistranslate without betraying the past. Indeed, it is a beautiful motto for medieval translation studies. For fidelity to the past requires freedom, and only by taking some liberties will we remain faithful.

The truth of "more or less" shines through the folds of translation that engulf Derrida's own concluding sentence: Derrida ends his essay by repeating Benjamin's last sentence. In French, however, "interlinear" (German, English) is "intra-linéaire." The contrast between *inter-* (between two things) and *intra-* (within one thing) exposes a profound conceptual difference among the languages regarding the relation between a text and a gloss written alongside. The difference between "between the lines" (interlinear) and "within the lines" (intra-linéaire) pinpoints the malleability of difference itself. When one kind of boundary distinction (between, within) is made equivalent to its opposite, translation is once again both impossible and necessary. What is more, the French concept *intra-linéaire* is "truer" to Benjamin's theory than even the German itself, for Benjamin conceptualizes the source and the translation as a single whole. The French translation of Benjamin thus reveals a true meaning by betraying the original meaning. Meanwhile, the English translation of Derrida achieves a different truth by seeming not to translate at all from the original (German) that is not in fact its source. Such conundrums make *différance* a sacred principle of translation.

The publishing record of Derrida's essay, much like Benjamin's, raises its own issues for translation and *mouvance*. This record provides meaningful analogies for medieval textual transmission even as it shows again how medievalists are particularly equipped to assess the intricacies of modern theory. First of all, Derrida's essay has no clear first publication

<sup>17</sup> For example, Dearnley, *Translators and their Prologues*.

<sup>18</sup> Graham, "Des Tours de Babel," p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, "Des Tours de Babel," p. 191.

<sup>20</sup> Griffin, "Translation and Transformation," p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> Griffin, "Translation and Transformation," p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Rendall, "The Translator's Task," p. 158.

<sup>23</sup> Graham, "Des Tours de Babel," pp. 191–94.

<sup>24</sup> Griffin, "Translation and Transformation," pp. 51–52.

<sup>25</sup> Graham, "Des Tours de Babel," p. 192.

<sup>26</sup> Graham, "Des Tours de Babel," p. 195.

date, first version, or even first language. It appeared in print in 1985 in two venues: an English translation followed by a French “Appendix” in *Difference in Translation* and in French in a collection celebrating Benjamin’s French translator Maurice de Gandillac.<sup>27</sup> This latter essay is signed “Paris-Yale, 1979,” seeming to fix the date—yet the place is now an impossible amalgam. In terms of their arrival in the public sphere, all three texts happen “at once.” Both French texts published in 1985 are called the “first version” when the second version appears in 1987 in *Psyché: inventions de l’autre*. The first variant occurs in the third line: “Si nous considérons”<sup>28</sup> and “Considérons.”<sup>29</sup> The difference between a conditional and a command is a symptomatic Derridean question. Even without elaborating further on the French publishing record (there is more!), the workings of *mouvance* are clear.

The splintered record of Derrida’s French essay is amplified with the anthologizing of Graham’s English translation. From the 1990s on, those who have sought a concise English introduction to Derrida’s work have found no Benjamin in “Des Tours de Babel”: *A Derrida Reader* (1991) ends just before the paragraph that includes Benjamin.<sup>30</sup> Those who seek an authoritative introduction to translation also miss Benjamin in *Theories of Translation* (1992), although they get one additional paragraph between ellipses.<sup>31</sup> More recently, the anthology *Global Literary Theory* (2013) has put Benjamin back in circulation, although again excerpted. In a lovely irony, the section excised from Derrida’s text begins: “Here two questions before going closer to the truth.”<sup>32</sup> Thus in a new anthology that aims to expand the bounds of literary theory, we are stopped three steps before the truth of translation that Derrida ultimately promises. Through excerpting, these anthologies turn Derrida’s text into its own supplement, yet shear away the theoretical

import of this procedure. Medieval translation studies, however, can return the favor by exposing the theoretical significance of textual transmission.

Translation of Derrida brings us finally to Venuti. He is most known for his work targeting the ethics of the translator’s visibility in the history and practice of translation.<sup>33</sup> He identifies a long history in which translators were meant to efface their impact and render texts that fit seamlessly into readers’ cultural expectations—a mode he labels “domestication” of the source text via translation. For medievalists, domestication corresponds to relations with the past based on similarity or continuity. By contrast, Venuti proposes an approach that challenges readers’ expectations—a mode he labels “foreignization.” For medievalists, foreignization corresponds to relations with the past based on difference or rupture. In practice, translations (and medievalists) intermingle domestication and foreignization, to various ends. Much engagement with Venuti, by medievalists or others, aims to elucidate the dynamic interactions of “saming” and “othering” in particular texts as well as their effects on readers.<sup>34</sup> When we think about the Middle Ages itself through this translational paradigm, we can see how modern theory helps maintain a dynamic balance between difference and similarities, distance and closeness. Rather than de-historicizing the European Middle Ages, modern theoretical approaches to translation have import far beyond literal translation.

In order to illustrate how Venuti’s theories can sharpen historical focus in translation studies, I will focus on his analysis of his translation of a Derrida lecture, “Qu’est-ce qu’une traduction ‘rélevant?’” Venuti’s commentary on “Translating Derrida” draws on the broad themes of his work: the interplay of domestication and foreignization, along with methods for disrupting the legacy of the “translator’s invisibility.” He points out how English translations of Derrida have largely used an American English idiom that “domesticated” Derrida’s often unconventional French syntax. By reducing the “foreignness” of the idiom, translators paved the way for Derrida’s smooth reception in American academic discourse. By contrast, Venuti endeavored to render Derrida’s style in a way that would sound as unfamiliar in English as it does already in French.<sup>35</sup> Venuti describes his approach as implementing Philip Lewis’s concept of “abusive fidelity.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Graham, “Des Tours de Babel” (English); Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” in *Difference in Translation* (French); Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” in *L’Art des confins* (French). Ángeles Carrerres delves into the poetics of Graham’s translation (“The Scene of Babel”).

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” *Arts des confins*, p. 209; *Difference in Translation*, p. 209.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” *Psyché*, p. 203.

<sup>30</sup> Kamuf, “The Task of the Translator”; Graham, “Des Tours de Babel,” p. 175.

<sup>31</sup> Shulte and Biguenet, “Des Tours de Babel”; Graham, “Des Tours de Babel,” p. 184.

<sup>32</sup> Lane, “The Task of the Translator”; Graham, “Des Tours de Babel,” p. 191.

<sup>33</sup> Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility and The Scandals of Translation*.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Sutherland, “*Beuve d’Hantone / Bovo d’Antona*.”

<sup>35</sup> Venuti, “Translating Derrida,” 250–51.

<sup>36</sup> Venuti, “Translating Derrida,” 252.



This kind of translation “values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies and plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, Lewis proposed the concept specifically to account for translation of Derrida into English.<sup>38</sup>

For Venuti, following Lewis, the “abusively faithful translation” works in two directions, pressing on the source language as much as it does on the target language, resisting transparency in all directions by calling attention to discursive practices.<sup>39</sup> This double process parallels Benjamin’s theory of how a translation affects its source. Since medievalists in translation studies are just as interested in analyzing the source as the target, especially when the source is medieval, Venuti’s approach has great power as a method for historical study. A theoretical approach that exposes the labor of interpretation and makes the reader also a translator<sup>40</sup> suits medieval studies, as historical distance ensures that there is no “ease of reading.” We can never be sure that a particular translator sought or achieved “fluent translating”<sup>41</sup> without enormous labors of interpretation. We need first to hypothesize what fluency even looked like, filtering our efforts through our own always partial fluency. Venuti’s attention to the interplays of linguistics and culture thus has substantial implications for medieval translation studies.

The content of Derrida’s lecture furthers Venuti’s own theories with its theme of “relevance,” a word situated ambiguously between French and English.<sup>42</sup> Is the word *relevant* English or French? The homograph collapses the boundary between language systems. This polyglot ambiguity points to the great relevance of these modern theories for medieval texts, where homographs and homophones abound. Whether they result from translations or original expressions by multilingual writers, they are amplified by historically porous boundaries

between language systems. How modern translations resolve these ambiguities raises further questions for medieval studies. We might even ask about homographs across time: can we always tell if a word is medieval or modern? Translation can have homogenizing affects on linguistic, geographic, and historical differences. Indeed, modern translations of medieval texts are part of the same global publishing infrastructure that Venuti faults for reinforcing a single world-dominant “English.” Instead, Venuti draws attention to the many “Englishes” throughout the world: “a translation practice can turn the interpretation of translated texts into an act of geopolitical awareness.”<sup>43</sup> Medievalists might replace “political” with “historical,” but the impact of diversified translation practice can be similar. The availability of manuscripts, editions, and translations for teaching and research is shaped by the same forces that condition modern translation studies. Venuti’s approach, like Benjamin’s, asks us to assess these forces at the same time that we assess “the text itself.”

A fourth influential theory must also be discussed, even though not appearing in *Rethinking Medieval Translation*: polysystems theory. In this approach, first elaborated by Itamar Even-Zohar in the 1970s, the value of a given text is determined by interactions among textual systems rather than through inherent properties. Polysystems theory rejects “value judgments of cultures and culture production: a text does not reach the apex of hierarchy due to some inherent ‘beauty’ or ‘verity’, but because of the nature of the target polysystem, and because of the difference between certain aspects of the text and current cultural norms.”<sup>44</sup> Translation does not operate with predefined textual systems that have fixed internal rules, but rather in a system of systems whose interactions change over time. The place of a text in the system is not predetermined, the centre and periphery are not fixed. Over time Even-Zohar moved from linguistic translation to a broader notion of transfer<sup>45</sup>—a move well suited to medieval studies, where *translatio* refers to many transfers besides interlingual ones. Indeed, largely due to the fact that polysystems theory endeavours to not take for granted *any* textual category, it has proven genial to the medieval context where genres and the very definition of “literary” are often quite distinct from modern frames. Lynn Long, for example, uses the example of fourteenth-century England to show how

<sup>37</sup> Lewis, “The Measure of Translation Effects,” p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis is entangled with the Benjamin-Derrida-Venuti chain in other ways as well. His essay appears first in the volume that ends with Derrida’s “Tour de Babel”; it is reprinted alongside Benjamin in Venuti’s *The Translation Studies Reader*. Lewis describes his essay as “a kind of ‘free’ translation” of an earlier version published in French (1981), where he analyzes the English translation of Derrida’s “La mythologie blanche.”

<sup>39</sup> Venuti, “Translating Derrida,” pp. 255, 258; Lewis, “The Measure of Translation Effects,” p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Venuti, “Translating Derrida,” p. 255.

<sup>41</sup> Venuti, “Translating Derrida,” p. 258.

<sup>42</sup> Venuti, “Translating Derrida,” pp. 251–52.

<sup>43</sup> Venuti, “Translating Derrida,” p. 259.

<sup>44</sup> Ben-Ari, “An Open System of Systems,” p. 147.

<sup>45</sup> Ben-Ari, “An Open System of Systems,” p. 147.

translated literature moved from the centre of a “weak host system” to the periphery as the English language gained cultural prestige.<sup>46</sup> The texts themselves may have remained the same, but their function in the system responded to changes in other cultural systems.

Polysystems theory reinforces some of Venuti’s conclusions about culture and translation, especially in regard to the politics of language and market value. For example, polysystems theory provides a similarly cogent structure for assessing the cultural work of modern translations. For starters, modern translations of medieval texts form a distinct and identifiable canon of “best sellers.” These in turn affect the canon of medieval literature because their breadth of readership drives attention to certain “originals” more than others. In some places the historical and modern canons may coincide, but in others the two systems may be in conflict or tension. In all cases, they are mutually influencing each other in an ongoing process shaped as much by surviving manuscripts as by global print marketing in the twenty-first century. Something that was important in the past may not be so in the present due to translation access, or length, or other factors “out of step” with modern textual and cultural systems. Digital networking is another system that is impacting the textual canon, with media transfer functioning as another kind of translation. Digitized access can enable new canons to form, although resources for expensive projects are perhaps more likely to follow established canons. Polysystems theory can help pinpoint how changing communication technologies are affecting both linguistic and material transfers, and thus the future of medieval studies as a discipline.

## Conclusions

The onramps on the road between modern theory and medieval translation are infinite. For this reason I will not endeavour to enumerate possibilities for future applications of modern theory to medieval translation. This volume itself touches on thematic areas such as faith, gender, science, and pleasure. Many further ideas can be found in the collections referenced throughout this chapter. In my own past work, I have been especially drawn to postcolonial approaches, highlighting how translation negotiates power relations, both in the Middle Ages and in the modern reception of medieval texts and cultures.<sup>47</sup> Theories that deconstruct the

isomorphic relation between nation and language do much to illuminate medieval contexts, where neither nations nor languages had consolidated forms. Power negotiations extend to gender studies, where queer and transgender theories have significant implications for old metaphors that rely on gender binaries, attribute essentialized gender roles to translation functions, or privilege difference over resemblance. Theory can also conceptualize textual relations not based on genealogy and influences.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, modern theory expands the dimensions of “textual life” that are susceptible to explanation.

Theory, translation, and medieval studies have all been formative for the discipline of comparative literature. Medievalists’ engagement with translation theory can enable new scholarly connections across traditional period divisions, deepening cultural understanding for all. In keeping with my method for this chapter of taking field-defining anthologies as effective shortcuts through vast intellectual terrain, let me take up in conclusion *The Princeton Sourcebook of Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present* (2009).<sup>49</sup> Medievalists will notice right away that the subtitle leaves no room for premodern intellectual histories. Within the book, though, scholars of medieval Europe find familiar founding figures—Ernst Robert Curtius and Erich Auerbach. Likewise, translation studies scholars find familiar theorists—Even-Zohar and Venuti. The final essay by Emily Apter, “A New Comparative Literature,” proposes to re-centre comparative literature around translation, with reference to Benjamin and Derrida, among others. These intersections suggest new ways of locating medieval studies within comparative literature. As comparative literature has critically addressed its Eurocentric foundations, the European Middle Ages have been largely sidelined by multiculturalism and globalization.<sup>50</sup> However, as medievalist Adam Miyashiro has shown in the most recent “State of the Discipline Report,” this re-orientation of the discipline is in fact wholly compatible with medieval Europe.<sup>51</sup> Through translation theory, then, medieval studies can reinvigorate the relation between the Middle Ages and comparative literature in the twenty-first century.

<sup>46</sup> Long, “Medieval Literature.”

<sup>47</sup> Warren, “Making Contact” and “The Politics of Textual Scholarship.”

<sup>48</sup> Reinhard, “Kant with Sade.”

<sup>49</sup> Damrosch, Melas, and Buthelezi, *The Princeton Sourcebook*.

<sup>50</sup> Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature*; Saussy, *Comparative Literature*.

<sup>51</sup> Miyashiro, “Periodization.”

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**Michelle R. Warren** is Professor of Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College. She is known for her work at the intersection of medieval and postcolonial studies: *Creole Medievalism: Colonial France and Joseph Bédier's Middle Ages*; *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval Through Modern*; and *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300*. Her most recent work addresses philology, translation, and digital humanities.

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