Editors' Introduction

Thinking across tongues

Mary Kate Hurley^a, Jonathan Hsy^b, and A. B. Kraebel^c

^aEnglish Department, Ohio University, Athens, OH, USA.

^bEnglish Department and GW Digital Humanities Institute, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA.

^cEnglish Department, Trinity University, San Antonio, TX, USA.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2017). 8, 270–276.
doi:10.1057/s41280-017-0059-x

Boethius tells the story of a ‘fre man of corage’ (to quote Geoffrey Chaucer’s translation) who was ‘discovere[d] and accuse[d]’ by the tyrant against whom he was raising a ‘conjuracioun’ or ‘confederacye.’ The tyrant tortures this unnamed man, who, rather than giving up any information, ‘boot of’ [‘bit off’] ‘his owene tonge and caste it in the visage of thilk wode tyraunt.’ The point of the story (according to Chaucer and Boethius) is that ‘the tormentz that this tyraunt wende to han maked matere of cruelte, this wise man maked it matere of vertu’ (Chaucer, 2008, 416). The tortured man extends his punishment beyond what the torturer intended, and he thereby short-circuits the whole process, making it impossible to convey the desired information and turning the tyrant’s cruel infamy into virtuous fame. In Nicholas Trevet’s commentary, which Chaucer consulted throughout his work, the story ends with a gloss specifying that this act ‘was attributed to his [the free man’s] virtue’ [‘pro uirtute ei reputatum est’] (Silk,

n.d., 262).¹ Compared to Chaucer, Trevet places greater emphasis on the tongue itself, pedantically making the point that, ‘with the tongue cut out, he was unable to reveal anything even if he wanted to’ [‘qui ablata lingua non posset prodere si uellet’] (Silk, n.d., 262). The *ablata lingua* becomes a kind of tool whose potential use changes as soon as it is severed from the body, now made into an object to be thrown ‘in the visage’ of the tyrant. Roughly four centuries earlier, the translator of the Old English prose *Consolation* also emphasizes this organ more than his Latin source, repeating the word *tungan* [‘tongue’] to draw attention to that organ both as a piece of the body that is bit off and, subsequently, as the object thrown at the tyrant in an act of resistance: ‘Forceaw he his agene tungan and wearp hine mid ðære ... tungan’ [‘he bit out his own tongue and struck him with the tongue’] (Irvine and Godden, 2012, 86–87). Returning to Chaucer, a similar doubling of the tongue appears at the end of the *Troilus*, where the ‘gret diversite / In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge’ famously leads the poet to fear that his work might be ‘mysmetre[d] for defaute of tonge’ (V. 1793–1796, in Chaucer, 2008, 584). The perfect rhyme seems to require different meanings for each ‘tonge’: first, the variety of English dialects or orthographies, and, second, a hypothetical scribe’s linguistic shortcomings, his inability to cope with this ‘diversite.’ (At the same time, the notion of one’s *lingua* [‘tongue’] as akin to the ‘pen of a scribe,’ as in Ps. 44:2, keeps the word’s physical connotations in view here, too.) With these uses of ‘tonge,’ the poet now plays at resisting the tyrannical vagaries of scribes.

These ideas of the tongue – as physical organ/tool, as (mis)translatable linguistic matter, as contested locus, and above all as object of intense fascination and scrutiny – are the point of departure for this special issue of *postmedieval*, focused on medieval and modern theories and practices of translation. The essays that follow seek a capacious critical approach to cultural and literary studies, asking: How do histories of translation theory and literary history overlap with and inform one another? What kinds of histories (cultural, linguistic, philological, postcolonial) intersect with translation theory?² Recent work of many critical-theoretical persuasions has demonstrated how readily medieval contexts reorient history and theory: multi-vernacular Britain and France dislodge modern alignments of language and nation (Butterfield, 2010; Wogan-Browne et al., 2009), the interpenetration of languages throughout the Mediterranean yields new approaches to philology and connectivity (Akbari and Mallette, 2013; Mallette, 2005, 2014), medieval sites of intercultural contact and conflict invite engagement with disparate postcolonial contexts (Altschul and Davis, 2009; Campbell and Mills, 2012; Cohen, 2008; Warren, 2010), and Anglo-Saxon and later medieval poetry resonates across time with the work of modern poets and translingual writers (Jones, 2006; Hadbawnik and Reynolds, 2015; Hsy, 2013). The essays in this special issue carry these discussions further, push them in creative new directions, and assess afresh the pervasiveness of

1 At the time of his death in 1981, Edmund Taite Silk had completed but not published an edition of Trevet’s commentary, which has subsequently been made available online by Alastair Minnis. On Chaucer’s use of Trevet, see Minnis (1993). English translations of Trevet are the authors’.

2 See Mallette (2013) and Warren (2010).

translation in medieval culture. Contributions explore the flexibility, durability, and interpretive power of translation as a critical concept, evincing not simply a movement from one language into another, but rather a mode of thinking across multiple sites concurrently: across languages, media, and disparate moments in time. We approach translation as a concept that can be explored narrowly or broadly (interlingual translations, cultural translations, cross-period translations) and as one that (perhaps more than most) repays a wide range of critical approaches. Indeed, translation allows for and even encourages a sort of critical-theoretical cross-pollination (another sort of translation) that belies any too-strict divide between different methodologies. This special issue asks how translation transpires not only across languages and cultures, but also across time, space, and diverse modes of embodied experience.

‘Thinking Across Tongues’ does not aim, therefore, to produce a single definition or object of translation. Its essays incorporate works from Old English translated into modern Macedonian and Croatian, texts from the Hebrew Bible that find their way through Greek and Latin before arriving in England with Aelfric of Eynsham, a purportedly Arabic work that is ‘translated’ into Latin in the twelfth century (and into Anglo-Norman in the thirteenth and Modern English in the twentieth), objects of Muslim origin in a *chanson de geste* that find themselves in Frankish hands within the narrative (and in its readership), and finally, a comparison of the image of the wounded, translated tongue in the works of Prudentius (348–c. 413 CE) and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982). As the breadth and multiplicity of these authors and works suggest, translation is never only one object, narrative, or event – rather, it is an ongoing process that reveals the stakes of multilingualism, textual community, and narrative inheritance. These essays address divergent objects and objectives, but they produce collectively what might be called a recursive tracing with a difference – any translation, in a sense, repeats its source but also necessarily alters it. This overall approach is related to Karla Mallette’s work on Mediterranean *lingua francas*, which fittingly suggests ‘boustrophedon’ (the ancient Greek term for directionality of writing, suggesting the back-and-forth motion of an ox plowing) as a mode for reading across tongues (Mallette, 2013, 2014) and investigating concurrent cultural and literary histories via what Sharon Kinoshita calls ‘cross-readings’ (Kinoshita, 2014, 317–320). The backwards and forwards movements across languages and cultures in any intellectual act of comparative analysis goes hand-in-hand with the creative work of translation and the production of new forms of cultural difference and meaning over time.

In each of these essays, translation takes place across space and across linguistic difference, but it also takes place through time. Roman Jakobson identifies three different kinds of translation: intralingual, ‘an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language’; interlingual, ‘an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language’; and intersemiotic, ‘an interpretation of verbal signs by nonverbal sign systems’ (Jakobson, 2013, 127). Although these forms of translation differ in both the

kind of meaning they carry over and the system into which it is transformed, each one relies on a temporal logic – the source-language ‘version’ must be located, in time, before the target-language version. Denis Ferhatović’s essay in this collection demonstrates the stakes of this assumption. Although a simple one-to-one comparison of a translation of *Beowulf* to the Old English poem might highlight the deviations from and consistencies with the putative ‘original,’ Ferhatović gracefully uses the concept of defamiliarization in order to show how the temporal priority of a version of the poem does not exhaust its ability to reveal aspects of its original. Rather, a translation must look to both the past and the future: it must imagine the audience that will receive it, while it is also bound (to a degree) by the poem as it has been handed down. The nearly endless visions and revisions of *Beowulf* in the 20th and 21st centuries suggest that the poem itself seemingly demands its recreation by future readers.

The recreation of histories takes on a different cast in Mo Pareles’s essay on Aelfric’s translation of the ideas of ritual purity and impurity in his Anglo-Saxon Heptateuch, as Aelfric’s construal of these concepts adds a new dimension to the consideration of Christian ‘othering’ of Jews in the early medieval period. Pareles shows that, unlike medieval writers who position the Jews as “‘queers’ vis-a-vis Christian heterosexuals,” Aelfric figures Christian chastity as an alternative, non-reproductive method of filiation that contrasts with the ‘kinship-based heterosexuality’ of Biblical Jews. His methods of translation shed light on the ways in which Christian othering of Jews is wrapped up in the rise of monasticism and its valorization of Christian chastity. Thinking across tongues in this case produces a firmer role for a supersessionary narrative – one with a subtle but pervasive influence in the early Middle Ages.

The various attempts of medieval and modern readers and translators to grapple with a complexly composite text are at the center of Gabriel Ford’s essay on the twelfth-century *Disciplina Clericalis* of Petrus Alfonsi, a Jewish *conversus* born in Andalusian Spain and active, after his conversion, in France and Anglo-Norman England. The uncertainties of its composition (as compilation, translation, or some combination thereof) are matched by its formal novelty as a collection of short narrative exempla, and, Ford argues, translators rendering the text in Anglo-Norman (c. 1200) and into Modern English (1969) struggle to strike a balance between the different demands of this ‘untranslatable’ text. Ford pays careful attention to the ways both scribes and modern typesetters present the different sections of the *Disciplina*, arguing that these decisions reflect their different understandings of, quite basically, what the text is – an uncertainty that Ford traces back to the earliest manuscripts of Petrus’s Latin. This text may be untranslatable, then, because it was, from the outset, always in the process of being translated.

Interrogating *translatio* as a term for linguistic and cultural transfer as well as a term of disciplinary practice, Shirin Khanmohamadi’s essay reveals a rich Muslim pre-history of Roland’s famous sword in the twelfth-century French epic

Chanson d'Aspremont. The French text does not simply disclose the historical preoccupations of Norman nobility seeking to appropriate the social markers of Fatimid (Arab Shi'a) power in Sicily: the narration of the object's symbolism as it moves across Arab and Frankish cultures invites modern readers across divergent fields of study (literary scholars and art historians) to explore the meanings of both *translatio* and translation (or as Khanmohamadi phrases it: 'translatio/n') for non-textual objects. In this multilingual and multidisciplinary context, *translatio studii et imperii* functions not just as a symbolic or discursive paradigm but as a process deeply implicated in a 'material turn' that incorporates influences as varied as *spolia* studies and translation theory. She offers a 'three-dimensional approach' that helps us to 'move beyond ... surface pronouncements' to more capacious forms of linguistic and methodological depth.

Beginning with the motifs of severed and mangled tongues discussed above, Irina Dumitrescu's essay explores the materiality of tongues in Prudentius' Latin poetic sequence *Peristephanon* and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's polyglot mixed-media work *Dictee*. Through meditations on martyrs – Prudentius on Christian saints, Cha on medieval and modern women and revolutionaries – both authors attest to the power of the mutilated tongue to speak truth and to trauma's capacity, when spoken about, to contain paradoxical strength. Dumitrescu's comparative reading of Prudentius and Cha, two writers separated by both space and time, demonstrates surprising affinities in each figure's relationship to displacement and social subjection. This cross-historical comparison thus illustrates the rich transformations of literary voice and the reassessments of history that shape any process of thinking across tongues.

We close by returning to the language-crossings of one troubling tongue, whose recursive transformations across language, time, and space evince the tongue's paradoxical agency even (or especially) when that agency seems to be foreclosed. Like the Boethian tongue discussed above, the photograph on the cover of this issue, depicting Cha's 1975 performance of 'Aveugle/Voix,' manifests a discomfiting coexistence of voicelessness and resistance. Cha squats in front of a white banner with two white headbands: one, covering her eyes like a blindfold, reads 'AVEUGLE' ['BLIND'] in black letters, and another, held in her hands and stretching in front of her mouth, reads 'VOIX' ['VOICE'], again in black. As Trinh T. Min-ha points out, the words can be read both ways: in order on her body, *voix* followed by *aveugle*, or in reverse following the title she gave her performance. This second reading makes 'the play on voix (voice) and voir (to see) [. . .] all the more significant', because 'without seeing the written letters, Aveugle Voix and (l')aveugle voit (the blind sees) sound the same' (Min-ha, 2011, 117). Adding to the complexity of this play on sound and voice in Cha's performance, the banner held in her hand – if understood as a physical *banderole* (or inscribed speech scroll) – evokes a long-standing medieval artistic device, the unfurling white banners representing spoken utterances that are so ubiquitous in scenes of the Annunciation and other works of visual media. Miraculously and

disturbingly endowed with speech and enigmatically blindfolded in the process – and adopting a squatting posture as if poised for future action – Cha embodies a silent, blind object of the gaze while resisting any simple mode of translation.

Cha's performance piece foregrounds her own body as a site of translation and a simultaneously untranslatable sight: we can see her, read her words, but both her meaning and that of her words resist our ability to interpret them definitively. 'Aveugle/Voix' thus demonstrates a central theme of the essays in this issue. Our contributors enact divergent modes of thematizing language-crossings and explore the particular affective force that translation exerts as it carries something from one context (or world) into another: a process that can restore words and vital force to a dead or silenced tongue, or inflict violence by imposing meaning on a living one, or, somehow, do both. The power of translation is never singular; rather, it encompasses both possibility and danger, the promise of understanding and the potential for miscommunication. Translation's centrality to the Middle Ages – and its vital force in modern literatures – serves as a constant reminder of the potential risks, and deep rewards, of thinking across tongues.

About the Authors

Mary Kate Hurley is an assistant professor of English at Ohio University. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *Review of English Studies*, *The Politics of Ecology* (eds. Randy Schiff and Joseph Taylor), and *American/Medieval* (eds. Gillian Overing and Ulrike Wiethaus) (E-mail: hurleym1@ohio.edu).

Jonathan Hsy is an associate professor of English at George Washington University, and his publications on medieval literature, translation studies, disability theory, and digital humanities have appeared in *postmedieval*, *PMLA*, *Accessus*, *Early Modern Women Journal*, and *Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (eds. David Hillman and Ulrike Maude). He co-directs the *Global Chaucers* project with Candace Barrington (E-mail: jhsy@gwu.edu).

A. B. Kraebel is assistant professor of English at Trinity University. His publications include *The Sermons of William of Newburgh* (2010) and *Medieval Cantors and Their Craft: Music, Liturgy, and the Shaping of History, 800–1500* (co-edited with Katie Bugyis and Margot Fassler, 2017). Most recently, his essay on Chaucer and manuscript compilations is published in *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47(3) (September 2017) (E-mail: akraebel@trinity.edu).

References

- Akbari, S.C. and K. Mallette, eds. 2013. *A Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Altschul, N. and K. Davis, eds. 2009. *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of 'the Middle Ages' Outside Europe*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Butterfield, A. 2010. *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, E. and R. Mills, eds. 2012. *Rethinking Medieval Translation: Ethics, Politics, Theory*. Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer.
- Chaucer, G. 2008. *Boece. The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, gen. ed. L. D. Benson. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, J.J. ed. 2008. *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages: Archipelago, Island, England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hadbawnik, D. and S. Reynolds eds. 2015. *Contemporary Poetics and the Medieval Muse. Postmedieval* 6:2.
- Hsy, J. 2013. *Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Irvine, S. and R. Godden, trans. 2012. *The Old English Boethius: With Verse Prologues and Epilogues Associated with King Alfred*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jakobson, R. 2013. On Linguistic Aspects of Translation. In *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edn, ed. L. Venuti, 126–131. Oxon, CA: Routledge.
- Jones, C. 2006. *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Kinoshita, S. 2014. Mediterranean Literature. In *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, eds. P. Horden and S. Kinoshita, 314–329. Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Mallette, K. 2005. *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100–1250: A Literary History*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Mallette, K. 2013. Boustrophedon: Toward a Literary Theory of the Mediterranean. In *A Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, eds. S. C. Akbari and K. Mallette, 254–266. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Mallette, K. 2014. Cosmopolitan philology. *Postmedieval* 5(4): 414–427.
- Min-ha, T.T. 2011. *elsewhere, within here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Minnis, A.J. 1993. Chaucer's Commentator: Nicholas Trevet and the *Boece*. In *Chaucer's Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*, ed. A. J. Minnis, 83–166. Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer.
- Silk, E.T. ed. n.d. *Exposicio Fratris Nicolai Trevethi Anglici Ordinis Predicatorum super Boecio de Consolacione*. <http://campuspress.yale.edu/trevet>.
- Warren, M.R. 2010. *Creole Medievalism: Colonial France and Joseph Bédier's Middle Ages*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wogan-Browne, J., et al., eds. 2009. *Language and Culture in Medieval England: The French of England, c. 1100–c. 1500*. York, UK: York Medieval Press.