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Translating the Middle Ages

Professor Peter G. Beidler of Lehigh University and I have been cooperating on projects dealing with medieval drama, specifically several Middle Dutch comedies preserved in the Hulthem manuscript (approx. 1410), since 1989, when we published our first article "*Lippijn*: A Middle Dutch Source for Chaucer's *A Merchant's Tale*?" in the *Chaucer Review* (23, No. 3, 236-50). This cooperative effort, this constant checking back and forth, the detailed queries about whether this word was better translated by that English one, or whether this phrase really translated well into that English idiomatic expression, has led me to pondering and reflecting ever more about the role of translators and their products, the translations of a piece of literature.

Of course, there is an extensive body of literature dealing with the role of translations and the relationship of the original to the translation, as well as the relationship of the original author and his translator. Nevertheless, each attempt to render a piece of literature in another language seems to be a unique event, which seems to require a rethinking of precisely these roles, these relationships. The following is an attempt to clarify the thoughts that went into the development of my translation of Boss for Three Days.

It seems that any literary critic, when writing an analysis of a literary product, is in a certain sense translating it into another idiom. Depending on the audience he or she wishes to address, the interpretation may be written in the clear yet everyday prose of an article in the *New York Times Book Review*, where the writer presumes an inexpert yet intelligent reader, or as complex and fraught with specialized technical vocabulary as an article in deconstructive theory.

Yet how much more complex does the work of translating become if the literary work is the product of a time and society of more than half a millenium ago. The most obvious change is, of course, in the language. And this language reflects the technical and social situation of its time. If five hundred years ago a woman could neither earn nor keep her own money, one would expect that situation to be mirrored in the original text. And it would be the translator's duty to point out this social custom in an introduction or a footnote. Similarly, given a word used to describe a common object existing probably in every household, but long vanished from the modern world, the translator would be obliged to render that object accurately, yet this very accuracy might make the translation incomprehensible to a modern reading audience.

Even greater difficulties of comprehension are encountered when the piece of literature is a drama. The audience must be given the chance to understand the action on the stage during one fleeting moment of action and spoken words. They have no opportunity to go back over the text to see whether a second reading will aid in the understanding. No dictionary is handy for them to look up the meaning and usage of an unfamiliar object or piece of equipment mentioned by one of the characters, but whose correct understanding allows the modern audience to recognize a verbal joke which was quite obvious to the medieval one.

Furthermore, although professional literary critics do not question the intrinsic aesthetic value of

older literary monuments, one may not presume that a modern audience, indeed, even the young members of a university seminar on medieval drama will observe immediately the relevance of this literature to their own lives.

All of these difficulties and concerns were on my mind when Professor Beidler asked me whether I knew of any other Middle Dutch farces he could incorporate into an English graduate seminar on the medieval drama at Baylor University in Texas, where he was a visiting professor for a year. I offered him my translation of Boss for Three Days. However, I warned him that my translation was a line-by-line, literal translation and therefore barely readable. Indeed, to those unfamiliar with the Middle Dutch language and the social setting in which this play had been written and performed before its medieval audience, the text was not even always comprehensible.

In my translation work for my dissertation on the *abele spelen* and *sotterniën* of the Hulthem manuscript, I followed two very simple straight-forward principles:

1. Translate all the words accurately. Keep all repetitions, even if they merely serve to fill a rhyme, in observation of the venerable and honorable principle: *Reim dich, oder ich fress dich*! (Rhyme, or I'll gobble you up).

2. Translate every line accurately, even if violence has to be committed against English grammar and syntax. Each Middle Dutch line must match up exactly with an English line.

These two principles will produce an accurate translation which any scholar may consult and quote from with confidence. Individual scholars would then have to decide for themselves how radically they want to change the English translation in order to make it more readable to their own audiences. In addition, this type of translation can also serve as a useful source for anyone interested in learning Middle Dutch. Armed with a Middle Dutch grammar and dictionary, these translations serve admirably as practice material.

It was this line-by-line translation, then, which I offered Professor Beidler for his graduate seminar. The students were not only to write seminar papers on the basis of this translation, but it had also been decided to perform the comedy at the conference of the Southeastern Medieval Association and the Texas Medieval Association at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, October 3-6, 1996. For its modern dramatic debut at this conference the play needed a new translation in modern American English which would be comprehensible to an audience without straying too far from the sense and intention of the original. For inspiration and courage, I looked to Martin Luther and his oft-quoted dictum about his method of translation:

[...] man muβ die Mutter im Hause, die Kinder auf der Gassen, den gemeinen Mann auf dem Markt drum fragen und denselbigen auf das Maul sehen, wie sie reden, und darnach dolmetschen [...]
(*Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*)

[You must ask the mother in the home, the children in the street, the common man in the market place, and listen to the way they talk, and translate accordingly].

To illustrate this principle as applied to this translation, one example might suffice. At the very beginning of the comedy, during Neighbor Imbrecht's first speech, the experience of a modern American audience needed to be accommodated, when he declares that he wants to go to the pub and drink a great quantity of beer. The Middle Dutch has:

Ende drincken een goet hoet biden viere.

Translated exactly this line reads:

and drink a good coal hod (or scuttle) by the fire.

The image is quite hilarious: a man hefting a two-foot tall coal scuttle as a beer mug, illustrating his total dedication to the brew. Yet, it seemed clear that one could not expect even a well-educated and widely read audience to be acquainted with a "coal hod," and so I replaced "coal hod" with "pitcher."

Another translation problem arises from the fact that many Middle Dutch comedies derive their comedic effect from having the lower-class people who populate these comedies attempt to mimic the upper classes in style of speech and subject matter. Thus, they voice their opinions about love and proper behavior in the most stilted language, more often than not illustrating their ignorance of these upper-class speech habits and concepts by mixing — completely inappropriately — upper and lower class idioms. Yet, a generally classless society like the United States never developed two different speech patterns. In England, on the other hand, one may still observe that part of the working class speaks a local dialect, while the upper class speaks "the Queen's English." Thus, a modern American audience would be deprived of much of the fun of the comedy if these inappropriate speech patterns were eliminated. It is therefore important to reflect this "unnatural" prissy, fussy manner of speaking. To illustrate: Jan moans to his dear neighbor Imbrecht:

Oh neighbor, neighbor, neighbor, if you only knew how those of us suffer who have no clothes, no property, no money, and on top of that have a bad wife at home!

(l. 66-69)

This manner of speech, mincing and even delicate, simply does not fit the content, namely the problems of a lower class man of crushing poverty. It must be presumed that much of the audience's amusement derived from this mismatch of language style and content, and I endeavored to preserve this dichotomy in the translation.

But in addition to this translation in the traditional sense, taking a medieval comedy from an accurate yet utterly clumsy version to one which is reciteable by modern actors and comprehensible to a modern audience, the reader will find here another kind of translation. The analytical essays of the young scholars in Professor Beidler's seminar also brought forth translations of the kind mentioned at the beginning of this essay, namely interpretations from their own, modern perspectives. One may call this comedy a wonderful illustration of the eternal battle of the sexes, and each student has emphasized a different aspect of the comedy. Thus, one zeroes in on the almost business-like deal-making between husband and wife, while another examines the use of language as a tool of power, the attempt of the husband to deprive his wife of her powerful command of language with which she had run his life so effectively. Yet, no matter which aspect of the comedy each student chose to examine, they all seemed to accept one basic situation: namely that the husband is old, weak, henpecked, and stupid, while the wife is the dominant, clever partner in this marital union. In fact, almost all Middle Dutch comedies rely on this simple device: a stupid, old husband matched in battle with a vigorous, clever, and strong young wife. And everyone knows right from the start that the dimwitted husband will lose in the end, while the clever young wife will emerge triumphant from the battle.

Yet one might ask oneself whether the medieval audience did not find this basic premise of the comedy so very funny because it presented the relationship between husband and wife as exactly the opposite of what the audience knew to be reality. Medieval wives, in general, did not have control over their husbands, either financially or psychologically. In most of medieval Europe, women, married or otherwise, were kept firmly under the control and supervision of a man, be he father, husband, or brother. If the anonymous author of the comedy could simply presume that his audience was completely aware of the true relationship between husband and wife, then

much of the comedic effect would rely on reversing their roles. Yet in order to prove this theory valid, much more research would need be done with regard to the social, economic and legal position of the medieval woman.

I have called this project "Translating the Middle Ages," and that is what I did. The literal translation makes *Boss for Three Days* available to scholars of medieval drama. The students in Professor Beidler's seminar made use of this translation and, in writing their own analyses, translated the comedy into their own idiom.By re-translating the literal version, the comedy becomes comprehensible to a modern, English-speaking audience. Furthermore, *Boss for Three Days* invites more research in order to determine the real social position of men and women, so that future generations of scholars may gain a deeper understanding and produce more accurate "translations" of this comedy. Only then will this little masterpiece survive, stay relevant, and delight future audiences.