

Stefka Georgieva Eriksen: *Writing and Reading in Medieval Manuscript Culture. The Translation and Transmission of the Story of Elye in Old French and Old Norse Literary Contexts*. Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, vol. 25. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014. (231 p. + bibliography)

Reviewed by Torfi H. Tulinius

In a deftly conducted study, Stefka G. Eriksen shows in practice how a carefully controlled multidisciplinary approach can enrich the study of medieval literature. Informed by recent and less recent findings by scholars on the status of reading and writing in medieval culture, and combining translation studies, polysystem theory and a materialist examination of manuscripts in the spirit of new philology, Eriksen's book demonstrates convincingly how new thinking can cast fresh light on old problems but also allow new questions to be posed. Quite a lot has been done, in recent decades, to further our understanding of the translation, transmission and reception of Old French literature in Scandinavia from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, thanks to the pioneering work of scholars such as Marianne E. Kalinke, Eyvind Fjeld Halvorsen, Geraldine Barnes and many others. Eriksen is one of several newcomers to the field—among them one should mention Sif Ríkharðsdóttir and her 2012 book *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse. The Movement of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia*—who are proposing new ways of approaching this literary phenomenon, by thinking of them in terms of adaptation and exchange between linguistic areas and cultural milieus.

The focal point of Eriksen's study is the epic poem *Elye de Saint-Gille* in three versions. The first is in Old French and preserved in a late 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript from Flanders kept at the French National Library. It is the only manuscript containing this *chanson de geste*. Nevertheless, the existence of a Norse translation is indicative of a certain popularity of the poem in medieval Europe. The two other versions are the Norse prose translation of the poem as it is found in a Norwegian manuscript from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, kept at the University Library of Uppsala in Sweden, and in an Icelandic manuscript from the 15<sup>th</sup>, preserved at the Royal Library in Stockholm.

Eriksen's book is well constructed and judiciously divided into an introduction followed by five chapters. The introduction states the main objectives of the study and the guiding hypotheses. The first chapter provides a synthetic overview of the latest thinking on reading and writing in the Middle Ages as it can be of use in the study proposed. Then one chapter is devoted to each of the three versions or 'text-witnesses', as she calls them. The final chapter summarises and discusses the author's findings.

Eriksen's prose is clear and concise. She writes with a sense of direction and the arguments are well structured. This is of great help because her method is complex and requires of the reader that she or he assimilates a considerable number of new and challenging ideas and, above all, understands the way the author combines these concepts and theories into a unique approach. If I had only one adjective to characterise Eriksen's method, it would be 'dynamic'. Indeed, what emerges from her study is a clearer understanding of the essentially dynamic relationship between author, text, reader, audience, scribe, copyist, languages and social milieu in the literary experience of the Middle Ages. The complexity and multiplicity of the interactions between all these factors are so great that they cannot be fully described. However, the approach developed in Eriksen's book gives a better idea than most of all these dynamic relationships, thereby drawing up a uniquely vivid picture of the particular case she is studying.

The first chapter exposes the method. To underpin and justify the analyses to come of the three texts, Eriksen presents the theoretical background to her approach, discussing the advent of new philology, as well as scholarly debates about the relationship between orality and literacy, but also the rise of the vernacular, in Medieval Europe and Scandinavia. She also seeks inspiration and support in the work of scholars such as Rita Copeland, who has written extensively on the huge and understudied translation activity that went on throughout the Middle Ages. Eriksen is also influenced by the important theoretical work of Itamar Even-Zohar on the literary polysystem and the key role of translation in shaping literatures in any language. She then goes on to describe her method, which is as attentive to the textuality of the three versions of the story which are studied as it is to the materiality of the manuscripts in which they appear. This means that she divides her attention between the concrete characteristics of the three texts studied, i.e. what she calls

the *mise en livre*, the *mise en page*, and the *mise en texte*, and their more immaterial aspects, i.e. the way they are part of a wider and dynamic space of literary interaction. Here she focuses particularly on three new philological theorems she deems particularly relevant for her purpose (p. 9). The first is that each version of a text-work is “an intelligent response to a previous version”. All versions are intrinsically valuable, and therefore the Lachmannian search for a stemma becomes less interesting as attention is shifted towards variance and diversity. The second tenet of new philology adopted by Eriksen is to consider equally the material and textual aspects of her object of study and the third that the text is “conditioned by its cultural, historical, and social context and, at the same time, responds to the demands of its potential communicative context” (p. 9). This first chapter is of great importance in the general development of Eriksen’s argument and, as the reader proceeds into the following chapters, he may need to return to it once in a while to enrich his understanding of the analysis of the three texts.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the only text-version of the original French chanson de geste, *Elye de Saint-Gille*. Most studies of the Old Norse translations of medieval French literature do not focus in such detail on the original. However, Eriksen’s holistic approach, encompassing variance, materiality and context, makes it quite relevant to subject the original to the same type of scrutiny as the different avatars of the translation. She begins with a well-informed and wide-ranging—though succinct—presentation of the historical context in which both the original text and the manuscript were produced, Flanders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. She avails herself of the latest scholarly writing on the period and draws up a coherent picture ending with the conditions for manuscript production in an area where there is considerable evidence for professional scribal activity outside the monasteries, i.e. among laymen in towns. This is an apt prelude to the bulk of the chapter, which examines the text of *Elye* in its manuscript context from the threefold perspective mentioned earlier and which will be presented in more detail here. The *mise en livre* concentrates on the individual manuscript in which the text studied is to be found. In this case, it is relevant to note that this is the only manuscript which preserves the French original. However, as Eriksen emphasises, the existence of an Old Norse translation is in itself a sign among others of the popularity of *Elye* in medieval times. A long chapter is then devoted to the “codicological structure”, which is a more general description of the

contents of the manuscript, the four different texts it contains and the context it thereby creates for this particular one, i.e. *Elye de Saint-Gille*. This is a remarkable manuscript which “stands out as a coherent book” and was “originally written as one unified production unit and was executed consistently by one scribe and one illuminator” (p. 51). Together, the four texts, *Boeve de Haumtone*, *Elye*, *Ayol* and *Robert le diable*, form an interesting combination which Eriksen discusses in detail. Her conclusion is that the manuscript was professionally produced to function as “one usage unit” and that the “four text-witnesses were to be read dialogically”, since their contents were sometimes related but at least shared several features. Based on this as well as on considerations about some of the material aspects of the manuscript, she believes that it is possible to suggest “that the manuscript was intended to have didactic functions for the collective aristocratic audience at the court” (p. 59).

The study of the *mise en page* involves an analysis of the layout of the manuscript, i.e. the number of columns and lines, the structuring of the text by means of illuminations, rubrics and initials, and the way verse is divided into laisses and set off from the main body of text by having the first letter of each line a majuscule. Each of these aspects is analysed in separate and detailed sections, even marginalia receiving appropriate attention. This results in Eriksen’s overall conclusion that the manuscript shows considerable coherence, not only in the texts chosen, but also in the way they are presented and illustrated, the text-witnesses being meant to be read in dialogue with each other, possibly serving a didactic purpose for members of the court. A variety of formal features suggest that the manuscript was intended for public reading, but also to be read aloud for smaller groups who would then have been able to enjoy the illuminations, and even for private reading (p. 91).

By *mise en texte*, Eriksen means the use of punctuation and abbreviations. In this manuscript, they are employed quite a lot, which may support the theory of professional production but also indicates that the readers – in the case of public reading – were also clerically trained. It is an example, among others highlighted by Eriksen, of the use of techniques borrowed from Latin models of writing, showing the relationship between the vernacular and Latin in the period.

The chapter ends with a summary of her findings which allows her to remark on how the manuscript under study “confirms the multifaceted character of medieval culture and the constant interplay between Latin

and vernacular, religious and secular, learned and popular, written and oral” in the last decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (p. 100).

After this, Eriksen turns to the study of the two Old Norse versions, *Elíss saga* in De La Gardie 4–7 fol. and in Holm Perg 6 4to. She proceeds in a similar way as in the chapter on the French manuscript, structuring both chapters 3 and 4 around the concepts of *mise en livre*, *mise en page*, and *mise en texte*. As an introduction to chapter 3, she writes a very informative introduction in which she brings together many aspects of the context for manuscript production and literary translation in Norway in the latter part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is a milieu with a rich literary tradition, open both to local production, mainly historical or pseudo-historical works, but also to imported texts, translated both from Latin and French. As a background to her study, she examines a number of Norwegian manuscripts from the same period.

De La Gardie 4–7 fol does not only contain *Elíss saga* but also four other texts, an indigenous saga of a Norwegian missionary king, Óláfr Tryggvason, translations from Latin of a *Dialogue between Courage and Fear* and of the story of *Pamphilus*, and finally another translation from French of Marie de France’s Lais, called *Strengleikar* in Old Norse. This manuscript is more composite than the previous one and there is also evidence of a greater number of scribes working on it. Nevertheless, Eriksen concludes that there are quite a lot of indications in favour of its origin in a milieu of professional scribes, working for an aristocratic commissioner (p. 156). She also makes several interesting comments on the way the texts sit differently on the page suggesting divergent types of reading (p. 117–18), with many indications of public reading, though private reading cannot be excluded. By bringing together observations on the materiality of the manuscript and the way the texts are disposed on the pages, as well as available knowledge of the socio-historical context and the contents, not only of this particular manuscript but of others from the same period, Eriksen draws up a detailed and convincing picture of the socio-cultural environment for which this Old Norse adaptation of a French chanson de geste was intended. It is an educated group of members of the highest layers of Norwegian society, in close contact with the royal court. Eriksen’s method allows us to understand better the way in which the manuscript itself shows how integrated this social group is with the rest of the European aristocracy, sharing common tastes and cultural attitudes. This is without doubt one of the most interesting results of this study.

The third text studied in Eriksen's book is also a version of *Elíss saga* but preserved in a considerably younger manuscript written in Iceland in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. This manuscript is smaller than the others, nevertheless meeting professional standards for its time and seemingly produced in the North of Iceland. It is an anthology of twelve translated and autochthonous romances. Here again, Eriksen's presentation of the historical and literary context is well-informed, up to date, and relevant for understanding the reception of an earlier translation by a later Icelandic population dominated by a local aristocracy to a large extent left to its own devices by a distant royal power.

Holm Perg 6 4to is in many ways an interesting manuscript, not only because of its contents but also because of the quality of the scribal work. Other manuscripts with the same handwriting provide context and indicate that it was produced in a milieu close to the Church, as it is possible to identify the main scribe as a certain Guthormr from the monastery of Munka-Þverá. Eriksen's study of the manuscript indicates that it was intended for a trained reader, given the common use of abbreviations, and possibly for reading aloud, but also privately. This last conclusion is supported by the relatively small size of the manuscript, making it quite portable, but also by the use of rubrics, titles and initials, facilitating its perusal by an individual reader. Eriksen leans towards the hypothesis of the manuscript having been "enjoyed as private mini-library by its owner, somewhere in the north of Iceland at the beginning of the fifteenth century" (p. 207).

In a final chapter, Eriksen brings together the different conclusions from her research on the individual manuscripts. She thereby adds a new dimension to her study of the dynamics of reading and in writing in the Middle Ages. Indeed, as is shown in detail in this book, translation is a very dynamic phenomenon. This is true not only of interlingual translation, i.e. from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Flanders variety of Old French to the Old Norse of Norway in the same period, but equally of intralingual translation, which could also be called rewriting, since there are significant differences between the two versions of *Elíss saga* in the manuscripts. Here again, Eriksen enriches what otherwise would be a more traditional study of the difference between a source-text and a target-text with interesting observations on the manuscripts, using her threefold distinction between *mise en livre*, *mise en page* and *mise en texte*. The adaptations are not only linguistic, but can also be identified in the contexts in which the

different text-witnesses are placed within the manuscripts, and in the way the text sits on the page, and finally in the way the text itself is organised. These divergences are all significant and enrich considerably the picture of how medieval texts changed when they travelled from one linguistic area and social milieu to another.

Despite its coherent structure and the clarity of its writing, Stefka Eriksen's book is a demanding read. The reason for this is that she is developing a new and innovative approach in which she deploys a variety of skills – linguistic, philological, historical and theoretical – that few scholars are capable of combining in such an effective way and most readers are not accustomed to. However, the efforts required to read this important book are handsomely rewarded because it tells an exceptionally rich and vivid story of cultural interaction and change through the different manifestations in time and space of another story, that of the young knight Elye of Saint Gilles and his Saracen princess, Rosamonde.

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