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### Cornish, Alison. Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy: Illiterate Literature

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On ne peut donc que remercier Roger Green — et les éditions Droz — de cette publication qui rend aisément accessible un des témoignages majeurs de l'intérêt croisé des hommes de la Renaissance pour les psaumes, pour les classiques et pour la poésie néo-latine.

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**Cornish, Alison.**

*Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy: Illiterate Literature.*

Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 83. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. vii, 274. ISBN 978-1-10700-113-8 (hardcover) \$90.

This innovative work of scholarship will be very useful for specialists in Dante and Italian Studies as well as non-specialists in the fields of English, Comparative Literature and Translation Studies. It breaks new ground in that it is the first book-length treatment of the general phenomenon of *volgarizzamenti* in Italy—that is, the traditions of translation or “vernacularization” of Latin and French works into the Italian vernacular(s) between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy. Despite the fact that these traditions of translation or “vernacularization” were fundamental for the history of Italian literature and culture during the late medieval and early modern periods, they have not received synthetic treatment. Reasons for this include the sheer number of *volgarizzamenti* produced, the variety and complexity of the linguistic and cultural contexts which produced them, and the uncertain philological and textual state of the materials that have come down to us. Another obstacle has been that, given the variety and complexity of the phenomenon, a critical framework for treating *volgarizzamenti* as a general cultural phenomenon has proved elusive.

*Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy* successfully addresses these challenges. The book is impressive both for its boldness and its humility. Only an intrepid scholar would undertake to address in a comprehensive manner such a complex phenomenon as the history of vernacular translation from Latin and French in Italy during the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. The humility of the book is in its respectful and judicious consideration of the work

of others, and its careful weaving together of the various strands of previous scholarship into a series of chapters that cumulatively constitute an illuminating synthetic treatment of the *volgarizzamento* phenomenon.

The first chapter, "Dressing Down the Muses: the Anxiety of *volgarizzamento*," surveys the status of *volgarizzamenti* from Latin with a focus on Livy in order to give a portrait of the variety of literary cultures in fourteenth century Italy. Analogies between the history and reception of *volgarizzamenti* and the status of women and of social class dynamics are also explored. While the chapter does not have a specific argumentative focus, it does offer a survey of topics under the general heading of *volgarizzamenti*, and thus serves as an introductory chapter to the book as a whole.

Chapter 2, "The Authorship of Readers," reviews the philological characteristics of *volgarizzamenti* and the methods applied to their study. It offers a phenomenological reading of three canonical *volgarizzamenti* (Bono Giamboni, *Fatti dei Romani*, *Titolivio*) and their surrounding traditions in order to map and more fully illustrate the complexities of the traditions surrounding *volgarizzamenti* in general.

Chapter 3, "Cultural Ricochet: French to Italian and Back Again," examines the complex literary relations between France and Italy viewed through the lens of several exemplary *volgarizzamenti* (Brunetto Latini, *Li fait des Romains*, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*). The method is an engaging recapitulation of the most current scholarship regarding these carefully selected case histories. Cornish, generally speaking, refrains from making claims for original theses or interpretations of her own but she does carefully delineate the various critical questions surrounding these works. The overarching goal is to offer an anatomy of literary relations between France and Italy through the lens of the *volgarizzamenti*.

Chapter 4, "Translation as Miracle: Illiterate Learning and Religious Translation," reviews the traditions of religious vernacularizations of the Bible, saints' lives, and other texts for their socio-cultural dimensions. The chapter also considers these *volgarizzamenti* as a metaphor for the processes of religious conversion itself as mediated by sometimes unreliable and incongruous go-betweens (such as Boccaccio's friars, including ser Ciappeletto). The strength of the chapter is in its review and well-ordered exposition of the state of the debate regarding relevant scholarly controversies surrounding the texts discussed.

Chapter 5, “The Treasure of the Translator: Brunetto and Dante,” represents a climax within the structure of a book about *volgarizzamenti* at the same time that it represents an original contribution to Dante studies. Cornish addresses Dante’s attitude toward translations, his use of them, and their position within his linguistic theories and poetics in general. The chapter is rich with new insights into Dante—for example, regarding the motivation for Dante’s condemnation of Brunetto; the Cacciaguida episode; Dante’s “vernacularization” of embryology and its links to his poetics; and the remarkable translatability of the *Divine Comedy* itself.

The last chapter, “A New Life of Translation: *volgarizzamento* after Humanism,” reviews the end of vernacularization and the turn away from the vernacular at the end of the fourteenth century, a moment epitomized by Petrarch and his translation into Latin of Boccaccio’s *Griselda* story. Subsequent humanist discussion of translation focuses on the problem of translation between equally prestigious languages, from Greek to Latin. By the time translation into the vernacular reemerges as an important cultural phenomenon in the late fifteenth century, works such as the Landino and Brancato translations of Pliny represent the expression of an early modern political and cultural environment.

Some might criticize the work of synthesis undertaken here as premature. Generations of scholars have, in fact, been engaged in producing scholarly editions and studying the traditions of transmission of the countless *volgarizzamenti* that were produced during the period. Paradoxically, the conservative philological character of much of this scholarship has had the effect of leaving us lost among the trees in a kind of scholarly *selva oscura*. Thanks to *Vernacular Translation in Dante’s Italy* one can begin to see more clearly the outline of the forest. Some others might criticize the work for not developing more aggressively some of its theoretical and literary critical premises—for example, in the areas of translation theory and gender studies. From the perspective of this reviewer, the author has struck the right balance between careful and informed philological scholarship and the suggestive literary-critical implications of the traditions of *volgarizzamenti* in Italy as a broader cultural phenomenon.

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