

"AUCTORES" AND "AUCTORITAS"  
IN LI FET DES ROMAINS

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The notion of authority, always complex, was no less so in the Middle Ages for being formalized. Writers as disparate as St. Augustine and Isidore of Seville schizophrenically coupled a reverence for antiquity with a fear of pagan contamination. Obviously classical authority was supreme and the "auctores," hallowed by time, were inevitable models in all things literary. Just as obviously divine authority was supreme, and the authority of the ancients might therefore be subject to revision or, at least, explanation. Such interpretive revision was not the product either of naiveté or a lack of classical scholarship. Mastering one's authors was rather a function of every Christian writer. It demonstrated the vitality of the classics to challenge, inspire, and (often!) provoke a contemporary world.

In the context of translation the question of authority was potentially more troubling. Respect for an "auctor" had inspired the translator to make a particular text available to contemporaries. To what degree must respect for those contemporaries influence the transference process which anyway could not, by the nature of things, be word-for-word transference? Clearly in the medieval relationship of author-translator-public there was a different balance of power from that obtaining in most modern translation. For the latter one might cite Gregory Rabassa's

discussion of translation as metaphor in "No Two Snowflakes Are Alike":<sup>1</sup>

The translator can never be sure of himself, he must never be. He must always be dissatisfied with what he does because ideally, platonically, there is a perfect solution, but he will never find it. He can never enter into the author's being and even if he could the difference in languages would preclude any exact reproduction. So he must continue to approach, nearer and nearer, as near as he can, but, like Tantalus, at some practical point he must say ne plus ultra and sink back down as he considers his work done, if not finished (in all senses of the word).

Modern translative angst derives from a conflict between the translator's ideal of total re-creation and his realization that the ideal is an impossibility. For him the authority of the author is absolute and he openly admits subservience. In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, the interaction of author, translator, and receptor was continuously modulated and the translator with his clerical responsibility to the "illiterati" did the fine tuning.

The ever-shifting relation of translator to authority is ideally demonstrated in the thirteenth-century compilation which first introduced Julius Caesar to the layman: Li Fet des Romains.<sup>2</sup> In its 744 pages an anonymous clerical translator, who did not think to append his own name to the encyclopaedic labor, carefully rendered all the known works on Julius Caesar into French, giving each author credit by name as he wove their narratives into a coherent

whole. (Lucan's name occurs 92 times, Suetonius's 26, Caesar's a.k.a. Celsus's<sup>3</sup> 14, and Sallust's 7).

Interestingly, the translator never used the word "auteur" to enhance the stature of his sources, even though most of them were in fact curriculum authors. His usage of "auteur" was confined to a context that was ill-defined, like the usage of his contemporaries who employed the term to impart (spurious) authority to fiction.<sup>4</sup> Thus he chose to supplement Lucan's account of Cato's journey through Libya with the following vague allusion: "Dejoste cel estanc coroit une iae plesant, Lethes fu apelee, qui sonne autretant come obliement. . . . A meismes de cele iae et de l'estanc estoit li leus ou li renomez vergiez ot jadis esté dont Ovides et li autre auctor parolent" (592, ll. 12-19, emphasis added). [By this pond flowed a delightful river called Lethe, which means oblivion. . . . Alongside this river and the pond was the place where once was that famous orchard of which Ovid and the other authors speak].<sup>5</sup>

The word "autorite" was similarly infrequent, although there was no question that the notion it conveyed was clearly understood:<sup>6</sup> "[Cesar] mout fist escriz, et enfes et bachelers et huem, mes il ne furent pas tuit publié ne mis avant. Macres, qui s'entremetoit des bibles Augustus, en lessa plusors par son commandement, car Augustus nes vost pas toz metre en autorité" (724, ll. 25-29). [Caesar as a boy, a youth, and in maturity wrote many things but not all were published or saw the light of day. Macer, librarian of Augustus, set several aside by command of Augustus who did not want to vouch for the authoritativeness of all of them]. The concern of both Augustus's librarian and the medieval translator to avoid spuriousness is obvious. And it is now of particular interest

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to observe what material was considered spurious. For example, not all of Julius Caesar's works were yet identified as such. The translator's passing comments merit full quotation:

Livres fist il meïsmes de ses ovraignes, des batailles de France et contre Pompee, et espystles au senat et a Cyceron, et autres escriz assez que nus ne savoit blasmer. Ja tant ne fust en ost n'en chevalerie que il ne s'estudiast en fere escriz, lues que il avoit un poi de loisir. Il fist .ij. livres que l'en apele "Analogies," el retor de France, et .ij. au siege de Monde: "Anticatons" les apeloit, et un autre poeme, <"L'Aler"> ot non, a l'aler de Rome en Espagne. Tot son tens voloit gaster ou en chevalerie ou en cler<g>ie, sanz les hores de boivre et de mengier et de solacier od dames. Mout fist escriz. . . . (724, ll. 16-25).

[He himself wrote books about his achievements, the wars in Gaul and against Pompey, letters to the Senate and to Cicero, and many other irreproachable writings. He was never so involved in war or in military matters as to neglect giving his attention to his writing as soon as he had some leisure. He wrote two books entitled "Analogies" when he returned from Gaul, and two entitled "Anti-Cato," at the seige of Munda, and another poem entitled "The Journey" on the way from Rome to Spain. He liked to spend his time either in warfare or

studying, except for the hours he devoted to drinking, eating, and womanizing. He wrote many things. . . .]

Significant for our present purpose is the vagueness of that reference to the Commentarii de bello gallico: "Livres fist il meismes de ses ovraignes, des batailles de France. . . ." Knowing that Caesar had written about his campaigns in Gaul, the translator was nevertheless unaware that he himself had just translated that very work in its entirety! In fact, The Gallic Wars was the most important and most extensive source for Li Fet des Romains: 403 paragraphs, as compared with 293 for Lucan, 121 for Suetonius, and 60 for Sallust. Even without knowledge of its author, however, the translator could not fail to observe the authoritativeness of the narrative to the point where he felt impelled for the sake of his public to fabricate a lie--modern editors might term it a scholarly hypothesis--to validate the credentials of the mystery man who was able to explain Caesar's tactical, political, and psychological motivation and to penetrate Caesar's innermost thoughts.

His "explanation" of the source's authoritativeness was inserted when Caesar had remarked upon the fruitlessness of "our" inquiries about midwinter night in Britain: "Nos nihil de eo percontationibus reperiebamus, nisi certis ex aqua mensuris breviores esse quam in continenti noctes videbamus," Commentarii V, 13. [We learned nothing about this matter when we inquired, except that by precise water measurements we noted that the nights were shorter here than on the Continent.] To make the meaning of "nos" more explicit the translator fabricated an eye-witness named

"Julian" who had been Caesar's constant companion in Britain. The resulting text was: "Nos en demandames assez as paisanz de Bretagne, dist Juliens qui ce livre fet, car nos i fusmes avec Cesar, n'onques rien ne nos en sorent a dire" (184, ll. 24-26). [We asked the inhabitants of Britain many questions about this, said Julian, the author of this book, for we were there with Caesar, but they were never able to tell us anything.]

The name "Julien" was not produced ex nihilo. "Julius Celsus Constantinus uc legi" was an inscription on the manuscripts used by the translator. Besides, who could have guessed that the great "imperator" himself would have chosen to execute much of his history in the misleading form of a third-person narrative? No wonder "nos" needed clarification, and any modern editor, confronted with the same pronouns, would presumably reach similar conclusions. And so the translator, lacking our modern device of footnotes, melded an explanation into the text, to validate (with fabricated authority!) the credentials of the source. The explanation that "Julien" had been physically present with Caesar in Britain would convince a medieval public of the eye-witness authority of Li Fet des Romains. And for this lie the translator had the greatest authority of all: Isidore of Seville, referred to reverently in Li Fet des Romains as "L'Escriture." Isidore might be judged responsible for the translator's "car nos i fusmes" by virtue of his categorical statement: "Apud veteres enim nemo conscribat historiam, nisi is qui interfuisset, et ea quae conscribenda vidisset," Etymologiae I, 41. [Among the ancients no-one wrote history except the eye-witness who had seen what was to be recorded.] What other justification was needed for the translator's reasoned hypothesis?

A climate of eye-witness truth was difficult to maintain when the translator embarked upon his second largest source: Lucan. Lucan was not an eye-witness of Rome's Civil War and his avowed purpose in writing De bello civili was to blast the Caesars by all possible rhetorical means. (The translator wished, selectively, to propose Julius Caesar as a model to his monarch Philip later to be called, not surprisingly, "Augustus"!) Most problematic of all was the fact that the De bello civili was in verse, a medium suspect in the Middle Ages as inimical to truth. The translator's solution was a radical one: to translate only what the Middle Ages termed "la matere." An excellent illustration is his translation of the first ten lines of De bello civili IX. The source had lyrically described the apotheosis of Pompey whose soul could not be held captive by a handful of ash. It burst forth from the pyre, leaving behind the hero's half-consumed members, then pursued a course toward the convex regions of Jove the Thunderer, through the aether among half-deified shades in that region where the shadowy air joins on to the star-bearing poles.

At non in Pharia manes iacuere favilla,  
 Nec cinis exiguis tantam conpescuit  
     umbram:  
 Prosiluit busto semustaque membra  
     relinquens  
 Degeneremque rogam sequitur convexa  
     Tonantis.  
 Qua niger astriferis conectitur axibus  
     aer  
 Quodque patet terras inter lunaeque  
     meatus,  
 Semidei manes habitant, quos ignea  
     virtus  
 Innocuos vita patientes aetheris imi

Beer

Fecit, et aeternos animam collegit in  
orbes:  
Non illuc auro positi nec ture sepulti  
Perveniunt.

The imagery was majestic, the science was dubious, and the metaphysics obviously non-Christian: a real conflict of authorities. Here the translator opted to become master of his author, while cleverly allowing Lucan the authority that came from precedence. First he modified Lucan's imagery, carefully balancing Christian orthodoxy and Stoic metaphysics. His reductive translation was:

Li os et la cendre dou cors Pompee  
furent mis en ce petit sepulcre covert  
de <a>raine et d'un pou de pierres par  
desus. Mes li espirist, ce dist  
Lucans,--qui le veust si l'en  
croie,--s'en ala vers la lune en air  
(574, ll. 2-5).

[The bones and ash from Pompey's corpse were placed in that small sepulchre, covered with sand and a handful of stones. But his spirit--Lucan said this, whoever wishes may believe it--departed upward toward the moon.]

The caveat "qui le veust si l'en croie" disassociated the translator from the pagan content of the source and demonstrated his dual allegiance to an author and a contemporary Christian public. Those shades of heroic demi-gods hovering in the upper air; that immediate escape of Pompey's soul without let or hindrance from its funeral pyre to meet them; and that apotheosis of pagan heroes all involved theological error that the translator was

unwilling to perpetrate.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Lucan was an "auctor." Thus, the translator appended to line 5 a token homage: "por itant con Lucans le dist le vos rendons" [inasmuch as Lucan said this, we render it for you].

Elsewhere the translator used a disclaimer to protect Lucan's authority<sup>8</sup> during a fabulous narration about serpents in the Libyan desert. While the enumeration of venomous serpents and their properties was as valid as a medieval bestiary, the narration of the Perseus-Medusa myth to explain the origin of serpents was not. The translator therefore began the episode with an explicit "Ce dist Lucans . . ." (603, l. 20), interpolated "ce dist la fable" in the middle (l. 34), then cut off the narration at Lucan's statement that the first serpent, the asp, was born from Medusan blood-drops: "Et li premiers serpenz qui en nasqui si fu a<s>pis, dont li venins est plus cruie<x> que d'autre<s> serpenz" (604, ll. 8-9). His explanation was that the story was untrue and anyway even Lucan did not believe it himself: "Plus en dist encore assez la fable et plus en recorde Lucans. Mes por ce que ne samble pas veritez et Lucans meïsmes nel croit pas, nos n'en volons cest livre encombrer de plus" (l. 10 ff.). He then invoked the supreme authority that made it impossible to accept the author's story as literal truth: "Nos savons bien par tesmoign de Seinte Escriture que Damlediex cria serpenz des le commencement dou monde" (ll. 14-15). [We know for a certainty through the testimony of Holy Scripture that the Lord God created serpents at the world's genesis.] It would be hard to find a more explicit expression of the medieval translator's attitude to his authors and to authority!

The same conscientious consideration was given to Lucan's poetic devices as to his

material. Of particular significance was the translator's treatment of apostrophe, a device used by Lucan so frequently that the climactic peaks of emotion tended to run together into bombast. "Thessalia infelix!" and "O Superii!" heralded emotionally charged political statements. The apostrophe might even combine with rhetorical questions: "[O Curio] . . . quid nunc rostra tibi prosunt turbata?" etc. In view of the fact that the translator could prune other poetic devices with such ruthlessness and consistency, it is surprising that he honored Lucan's apostrophe meticulously. The explanation lies once again with his interpretation of authorial authority. Apostrophe, however tedious to the modern reader,<sup>9</sup> was a direct expression of the author's own voice and was not therefore to be treated lightly. And direct translation of the device would confuse the narrative voices, suggesting perhaps that the translator was himself intervening in some exclamation, declamation, or interpolative comment. Thus the translator took care to relay the apostrophe directly from the author, taking care not to lend it an authority of his own.

Lucan's name occurs in attribution no fewer than ninety-two times throughout Li Fet des Romains.<sup>10</sup> Those ninety-two occurrences illustrate how much the personality of Lucan obtruded upon the translator's consciousness. Those ninety-two occurrences might therefore be viewed as so many illustrations of the translator's reverence for the "auctores" and of "auctoritas."

NOTES

1. The Craft of Translation, eds. John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) 12.
2. Li Fet des Romains, eds. L.-F. Flutre and K. Sneyders de Vogel (Paris: Droz, 1935).
3. For this medieval misconception see p. 19.
4. See Jeanette Beer, Narrative Conventions of Truth in the Middle Ages (Geneva: Droz, 1981).
5. This and all translations are my own.
6. The establishment of authenticity was, of course, crucial in regard to books of the Bible. A.J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship (London: Scolar, 1984) 11, cites the Dominican Hugh of St. Cher, who lectured on the Bible 1230-5, as explaining: "They are called apocryphal because the author is unknown. But because there is no doubt of their truth they are accepted by the Church, for the teaching of mores rather than for the defence of the faith. However, if neither the author nor the truth were known, they could not be accepted, like the book on the infancy of the Saviour and the assumption of the Blessed Virgin." Minnis continues, "It was regarded as a very drastic step to dispute an attribution and deprive a work of its auctor. Much more common was the tendency to accept improbable attributions of currently popular works to older and respected writers." Li Fet des Romains

provides an interesting variant on the above. When it introduced Caesar's De bello gallico to the layman, Julius Caesar was an established auctor but, because he was unnamed in the text, he was replaced with an unauthenticated but named guarantor, "Julien Celsus."

7. For a more detailed discussion of the translator's orthodoxy see Jeanette Beer, A Medieval Caesar (Geneva: Droz, 1976) ch. 12: "Christian Didacticism in Li Fet des Romains."
8. Pertinent comment on the medieval writer's creative use of antiquity for the instruction of his Christian contemporaries is contained in Edwin A. Quain, S.J., The Medieval "Accessus ad Auctores" (New York: Fordham UP, 1986) 11: "Perhaps in such a treatment of an auctor, the original views of the pagan writer might be rather hastily baptized, but in view of the supposition of the above points, viz., that all truth was from God and that what the gentiles had possessed in obscure and shadowy fashion should be illuminated by the eye of Faith, a medieval writer would merely consider that he was filling out the picture as his auctoritas would have done if only he had had the opportunity. Everything was grist for the mill of the Christian writer, since he felt that all truth, implicit and explicit, was his for the taking. Far from childish naïveté is this independence of mind and command over his material. The aim was eminently practical and the writer got from his source a glimmering of the truth that it was his object to teach. In view of the many condemnations of pagan

immorality of which we have evidence, it is impossible to suppose that the medieval writer really believed that Ovid, for instance, had a high moral purpose in writing the Ars amatoria. Ovid, as an auctor, was the possession of a teacher of the Middle Ages and he could be used for whatever purpose the teacher wished. Anything in Ovid that was in accord with revealed truth, was God's truth from the beginning: anything that contradicted it, had to be interpreted in a way that would save, externally, the auctor, and that could be used for the instruction of his pupils. The medieval teacher would doubtless be amused at our suspicions of his intelligence" (11-12). It should be noted of course that a translator was less free than other medieval writers to "do whatever he wished" with his auctor.

9. Lucan's twentieth-century translator J. D. Duff is much less meticulous than our thirteenth-century Anonymous in his rendering of apostrophe in the source. Duff's explanation of his omission of the device is: "All Latin poets make free use of apostrophe, more than is common in Greek or English, and Lucan uses it more freely than any of them. In this translation the apostrophe is, in general, suppressed and the sentence turned in a different way; the figure is reserved for the more important occasions," Lucan, The Civil War, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969 repr.) viii.
10. See p. 16.