The Danish Translations of the *Eufemiavisor* and the Literary Polysystem of Medieval Scandinavia

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Abstract: Traditional handbooks of Danish literature often present medieval literature as a static collection of texts accidentally handed down to us. The polysystemic approach, instead, can help us reconstruct the socio-semiotic context of medieval Danish culture and single out the dynamics through which this culture developed from its early stage, still characterized by a dichotomy between written Latin literature and oral Nordic poetry, to a more rich and complex system, in which different genres coexist and interact. Two different sets of events play a crucial role in this evolution: the conversion to Christianity and the integration of the Danish cultural system into a broader Northern European cultural system. To this second and later process, in particular, is due the import of cultural goods from Sweden to Denmark and, in particular, the translations into Danish of the Swedish *Eufemiavisor.*

Keywords: polysystem theory, culture planning, cultural transfer, medieval Danish literature, *Eufemiavisor*, Scandinavian courtly literature, Scandinavian romances, chivalry

Introduction

In their chapters dedicated to the Middle Ages, histories of Danish literature usually confine themselves to listing extant texts, offering information and hypotheses about the context of their production, and, in some cases, summarising their contents. The result is a more or less accurate survey of surviving medieval Danish texts, chronologically organized and enriched with some valuable socio-historical information. Though helpful, these presentations are scarcely able to account for the dynamics which caused the formation and the evolution of the literary system. What is needed is a framework in which to contextualise these dynamics which takes into account both the evolution of the whole, multileveled socio-semiotic system as well as the complex interplay of contacts with different literary traditions and cultural agents. Polysystem theory, a system of analysis developed by the Israeli culture researcher Itamar Even-Zohar and the Tel Aviv School that is now being applied to a growing number of different fields throughout the world, offers just such a nuanced

framework for understanding the dynamics and interrelations of the literary systems of medieval Denmark (Dimić 1993).[1]

The principal difficulty in applying this theoretical approach to the literary (and, more generally, to the cultural) system of medieval Denmark derives from the fact that only a small part of the whole textual production has been handed down to us. Though it is generally true of all European vernacular traditions that a large percentage of medieval manuscripts is lost, it is especially so for Danish literature due to the disastrous fire at the Copenhagen University Library in 1728, which destroyed many medieval codices. Our image of medieval Danish literature is thus incomplete and largely determined by fortuitous factors, and each inference we make from the extant texts must be considered no more than a hypothesis.

Textual production in medieval Denmark

With due caution, however, we can make some important general statements. First of all, it would be misleading to consider textual production in medieval Denmark in isolation from the broader context of European literature. Already before the conversion of the Scandinavian peoples to Christianity, Denmark was part of the Scandinavian cultural community: skalds performed their poetry at the Danish court as well as in those of other Northern countries (Kværndrup 1984: 428; Ferm 2015: 117), and the Danish king was quite certainly involved in the compilation of *Knýtlinga saga* as late as in the middle of the 13th century (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: xiii–xv). The conversion was, in Even-Zohar's terminology, a multifaceted act of 'culture planning' (Even-Zohar 2010: 78–97) of pivotal importance for the history of Denmark: the Catholic Church and the newly born Danish state cooperated in order to reorganize Danish society and reshape Danish culture according to the prevailing models in Central and Western Europe. The conversion did not only bring about the acquisition and the spreading of foreign religious practices and beliefs, but also the adoption of new models of social organization and of a new and complex symbolism of power. This act of cultural planning was made possible by the progressive strengthening and stabilization of the monarchy during the Viking age, as well as by the later alliance with the Catholic Church (Ulsig 1999). Without a strong monarchical power, such an ambitious operation would not have been possible in Denmark or in the rest of Scandinavia. In Even-Zohar's words: "planners must have the power, get the power, or obtain the endorsement of those who possess power" (Even-Zohar 2010: 88).[2]

The conversion launched a process of forming the Danish literary system into a local subsystem of the broader European system by transferring elements of the international

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1   Polysystem theory has revealed itself particularly fruitful in the field of Translation studies (Gentzler 1993: 105–143; Shuttleworth 2009), but has been successfully applied also to the analysis of intercultural exchange (see, for example, Bampi and Buzzoni 2013; Bertagnolli 2014).

2   On the process of conversion and on the consequences it had on culture, mentality, habits and worldview of the Scandinavian peoples during the Middle Ages see: Steinsland (1990 and 2005: 421–455), Winroth (2012), Schjødt (2013). More specifically on the role played by Christianity and Church in shaping and consolidating the Scandinavian monarchies see Bagge (2014).

Latin repertoire.[3] This allowed the Danish subsystem to produce texts able to satisfy the new needs of the institutions that promoted it, the monarchy and the Church.

In the first centuries after the conversion, the Danish intellectual elite's primary literary interests lay in the genres of hagiography and historiography, which helped to legitimise the standing of the Christian monarchy in the new ideological order (Friis-Jensen 1999). It is telling that two of the first significant Latin narratives produced in Denmark were the sacred biographies of two Danish royal saints: Canute IV and Canute Lavard (Ferrari 1998 and 2001). The task of adapting conventional hagiographic models to produce two original legends was outsourced to foreign (English) 'specialists': Ælnoth of Canterbury composed the life of King Canute the Saint and Robert d'Ely that of Canute's nephew, Canute Lavard.

The creation of a Danish hagiographical tradition seems to be thoroughly connected with the import of European historiographical genres. At least three noteworthy historiographical works were written in Denmark in the course of the 12th century: *Roskildekrøniken, Lille Lejrekrøniken* and Svend Aggesen's *Brevis historia regum Daciae.* Moreover, in the first half of the century annalistic historiography had begun in Lund. The transfer of models thus engendered a local tradition of historiography which culminated in the composition of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum.* It is important to note that this process of transfer did not occur in isolation from the rest of the Danish cultural system, but in dynamic interrelation with the other components of this same heterogeneous system. Saxo was a full-fledged European intellectual. He probably studied in France, and he makes explicit references in his work to internationally recognized authorities such as the Venerable Bede, Paul the Deacon, and Dudo of Saint-Quentin (Friis-Jensen 1999: 320). His masterpiece is local history, though it is inserted into the broader framework of European Christian history, and Saxo did not hesitate to make use of traditional lore to reconstruct and reinterpret the past of his people. To this aim – as he himself affirms in the prologue to *Gesta Danorum* (Friis-Jensen ed. 2015: 6–7) – he consulted Icelandic specialised keepers of memory (the presence of Icelanders, in particular of Icelandic skalds, at the Danish royal court is well attested in this period). In this way international scholarly traditions and local oral lore are drawn together to create innovative cultural goods, which contributed to reshaping the Danish cultural system.

In the terms of polysystem theory, the institutions controlling the production of texts – monarchy and Church – had enacted since the 12th century a process of transfer aimed at reorganizing the whole of Danish culture. The production of written texts in Latin became the central cultural activity in the young Christian state, while the circulation of vernacular oral texts continued in an increasingly marginalized position. These two spheres were not isolated from each other: the agents of the 'new' culture drew elements from the repertoire of the local traditional system and reorganized it according to the models adopted from the European system.

The strategies of culture planning carried out by monarchy and Church, however, did not represent a coherent, homogeneous whole: different projects and internal conflicts were

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3   "'Repertoire' designates the aggregate of rules and materials which govern both the *making* and the *handling*, or production and consumption, of any given product. [...] In the case of making, or producing, we can speak of an *active operation* of a repertoire, or, as an abbreviated term, of an *active repertoire.* In the case of handling, or consuming, on the other hand, we can speak of a *passive operation*, or a passive *repertoire.*" (Even-Zohar 1997: 20). See also Code (2003).

present in the relatively simple power structures of state and Church in early medieval Denmark. To mention just the most evident case: after Duke Canute Lavard was murdered by his cousin Magnus, the son of King Niels and heir to the throne, the Danish royal dynasty and the whole kingdom were lacerated by civil war, until the faction of the Duke's heirs finally prevailed and his son Valdemar became king in 1146. The political division manifested itself also on the cultural level, with the canonization of Canute on the one hand and the defence of his murderer's reasons contained in the *Roskildekrøniken*.

The project to integrate Denmark into the European cultural macro-system was completed in the 13th century. Danish authors such as Anders Sunesen, Boethius de Dacia, or Martinus de Dacia belonged to the international cultural elite. Karsten Friis-Jensen considers the success and the acquired centrality of Latin culture in the young Danish cultural system to have been a possible cause of the retarded development of a vernacular literature in Denmark (Friis-Jensen 1999: 322–323). The centrality of Latin literature, however, did not preclude the possibility of composing vernacular texts, and we do find texts written in Danish in the late 12th and in the 13th centuries, such as legal texts and Henrik Harpestreng's medical texts. Though these were practical texts that occupied a marginal position in the system, their existence testifies to the fact that the transferred tools of literacy had been applied to vernacular, non-narrative texts.

There are other factors that must be taken into account in order to understand the subsequent development of the Danish cultural system, chiefly that Denmark during this period was a multilingual society (Heebøll-Holm 2009: 43–45, 51–55; Ferrer 2012: 11). Beyond the religious, historiographical and philosophical texts, generally in Latin or Danish, prevalent in the 12th and 13th centuries, Danish intellectuals of that time had access to texts written in other languages. Denmark had particularly close political and cultural relations with the states of Northern Germany, whence it was likely exposed to many elements of the international cultural repertoire.

13th century Denmark and the chivalric ideology

That the new chivalric ideology had already reached Denmark by the beginning of the 13th century is attested, for example, by the *Historia de profectione Danorum in Hierosolymam* (Kværndrup 1993). This text, probably written in Denmark by a Norwegian monk, shares the ideology of the Crusades and of spiritual chivalry. Furthermore, the 13th century is the period when – according to a majority of scholars – a new oral narrative genre, the ballad, spread from the continent to Scandinavia (Jansson 1999: 15–16).

By the 13th century the Danish literary system was thus organized under the control of the monarchy and the Church, and international non-fictional genres written in Latin firmly occupied the centre of the system. The activity of culture planning had succeeded in canonizing at least one original Danish text, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, whose strong position in the system determined its prolonged influence within Danish culture also later, when different cultural elements were transferred from the European repertoire. These elements were at least partly already circulating in 13th century Denmark, but the evolution of the social and political systems did not yet create the conditions for a radical change and reorganization of the literary system. A lay aristocracy – in the

medieval, European sense – came into existence during the age of the Valdemars with the enlargement of the traditional *hird*, the abandoning of the *leding* system, and tax exemption for the new elite of professional warriors, but this aristocracy only gradually developed self-consciousness (Ulsig 1999: 32). As it did so, it came to appropriate the symbolic and ideological elements shared by the more advanced European nobilities. Though elements of the international chivalric, courtly repertoire were undoubtedly already known in the 13th century, they were not yet able to be productive in the literary field. In Pil Dahlerup's words: "høvisk kultur kan spores i Danmark fra slutningen af 1100-tallet, ridderslagning indførtes i slutningen af 1200-tallet, ballader digtedes fra midten af 1200-tallet, og det flade land Danmark havde masser af heste og ridende ridderskab."[4]

The transfer of the international courtly repertoire in the literary systems: the cases of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark

Whilst it is quite easy to identify the principal agents of innovation in the cases of Norway and Sweden, the situation is a bit more complicated as regards Denmark. The transformation of the Norwegian court according to the models of continental monarchies involved, to use polysystem theory's terminology, the importation of goods, e.g., manuscripts, as well as tools, e.g., techniques of composition (Even-Zohar 2002 and 2010: 9–14). This was principally done at the will of the monarchy, particularly Hákon Hákonarson and his successors. This cultural policy was successful: the transferred repertoire established itself in the Norwegian-Icelandic literary system not only as a 'passive' repertoire that provided the Norwegian-Icelandic aristocracy with a new understanding of itself and of the world, but also as an 'active' repertoire that engendered a new local genre, the original *riddarasögur*.

In Sweden, the transfer of the international courtly repertoire into the local literary system seems to be the result of foreign intervention, one of the principal agents of which was Eufemia, the German queen of Norway who acted as a patron for the first translations of courtly literature into Swedish. Also this act of transfer was successful: the cultural goods (the translated texts) became tools that enabled the production of new, original texts like the rhymed chronicles. On the other hand, even if we cannot identify a particular Swedish agent of innovation in the literary field, we know that the rulers of the Bjällbo dynasty – and in particular King Magnus Ladulås – were active in transferring courtly symbolic materials and structures, especially chivalry, into the Swedish cultural system (Harrison 2009: 410–417).

In the Danish system, we are not able to identify – as far as I know – specific agents of culture planning. However, a group of narrative texts dated to the 15th century testifies that a network of contacts with different cultural and linguistic areas made it possible to transfer models of chivalric literature into the Danish literary system which had already established themselves abroad some centuries before, and that were in some regions at least partly outdated (Glauser 1986: 204).

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4   "We have evidence of courtly culture in Denmark from the end of the 12th century onwards, knightly accolade was introduced at the end of the 13th century, ballads were composed from the middle of the 13th century onwards, and the flat land Denmark had a multitude of horses and knights" (Dahlerup 1998: 238). For a careful examination of all evidence testifying to the presence of chivalric culture in Denmark from the 12th century onwards see Heebøll-Holm (2009).

Danish 15th century manuscripts: sources and translations

This process of transfer is quite surely due to the emergence, in 15th-century Denmark, of a new, rich and powerful aristocracy (Glauser 1986: 203; Bøgh 1999: 79), which had close ties with the aristocratic circles of Scandinavia and of the Northern German states, and which had appropriated the whole symbolism of chivalry. This explains the plurality of source-cultures from which the Danish literary system in this period imports its models.

The narrative material of *Karl Magnus' Krønike* is drawn from a Norwegian source, as is, probably, that of the romance *Persenober og Konstantianobis*, whilst *Dværgekongen Laurin* is translated or re-elaborated from a German model, and the three *Eufemiaviser*, *Ivan løveridder*, *Hertug Frederik af Normandi*, and *Flores og Blanseflor* are translated from Swedish (Glauser 1986).

The *Karl Magnus' Krønike*, moreover, testifies to the interplay of written and oral sources in the production of literary texts in the Danish late Middle Ages. The *Krønike*, in fact, is an abridged version of the Norwegian *Karlamagnús saga*, which is a compilation of French sources. But the *Krønike* and the saga differ in an interesting detail. In accordance with its French sources, the saga gives the name of the master thief who helps Karl foil a conspiracy of unfaithful vassals as 'Basin', where the *Krønike*, instead, calls him Alegast. This name is clearly connected to the form Elegast used in the Dutch epic poem *Karel ende Elegast* and in the German version of this same narrative known as *Karl und Elegast*. We know that the story about Charlemagne and the master thief circulated in Denmark during the late Middle Ages because it is contained in four ballads, one Danish and three Faroese, that have been handed down to us.[5] Moreover, we know that a *fastnachtspiel* (carnival play) in Low German called *Koning Karl stelen vor mit Ollegaste* (King Charles went to steal with Ollegast) was staged in Lübeck in 1450 (Beckers 1983: 1001). It may therefore be argued that the Danish anonymous adaptor of the *Karlamagnús saga* recognized the character of Basin as the Alegast/Elegast/Ollegast of the oral tradition and changed the name in his version (De Ruiter 2005).

Besides the texts that we can reasonably consider to be translations – at least according to the medieval definition of a translation – we find also texts that, although not themselves translations, clearly testify to the import of foreign models of composition. This is the case of the *Rimkrøniken*. Though surely an original Danish creation, its narrative structure, consisting in a sequence of monologues pronounced by the different Danish kings, is in all probability borrowed from the Swedish *Lilla rimkrönikan* (Friis 1937–1945: 188–193; Pedersen 2007: 140–142).

In the case of the romance *Den kyske dronning* we do not know for certain whether it is a translation or not. If it is not – as it seems quite probable – it is at least evident that the author borrowed motifs, style, and narrative patterns from the same international kinds of narratives that contemporaneously influenced the Swedish *Valentin och Namnlös* (Glauser 1986: 195–202; Ferrari 1994).

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5   The ballads are published as DgF 469 in Olrik and Grüner-Nielsen (1967: 21–29). The Faroese versions are published as nr. 106 in Djurhuus (1968: 1–3).

Concluding remarks

Despite the scarcity of the manuscript tradition, the witness of the extant texts allows us to formulate some general hypotheses about the dynamics of the Danish literary system in the late Middle Ages. The undeniable increase in production of Danish texts pertaining to or connected with the international courtly genres demonstrates a thorough reorganization of the system in the course of the 15th century. The centre was no longer occupied by the hagiographical and historiographical genres long integral to international medieval literature whose language of expression was Latin. The Danish literature of the late Middle Ages, instead, was part of a complex cultural polysystem, in which different semiotic codes cooperated in providing the aristocratic elite with a positive image of itself, an ideological justification for its power and a code of conduct. It is in this dynamic context that the translation of the Swedish *Eufemiavisor* into Danish took place, and the same texts that had played a pivotal role in building the Swedish courtly culture thus contributed to the construction of the Danish courtly literature and ideology.

In the terms of polysystem theory, the imported repertoire was both *passive* – as it provided the aristocracy with tools for understanding itself and the world – and *active*, as it gave instruction about how to behave.

It is worth reiterating that the transfer from the international courtly repertoire into both the Danish and the Swedish literary systems occurred when this repertoire had already undergone a significant transformation in the more developed European cultures (Glauser 1986: 204). Because of the progressive enlargement of the social elites and the increasing role of the bourgeoisie not only in the economy and politics, but also in the literary activities, the strategies of idealization and the ethical concern typical of 'classic' courtly literature had elsewhere been partly abandoned for livelier, more realistic and sometimes rough descriptions of actions and characters. But the belated consolidation of a class-conscious aristocracy in Scandinavia brought about a belated import of courtly literature. As a consequence, the Scandinavian translators/adaptors of continental texts sometimes manipulated them in order to adapt them to the needs and the ideology of the patrons, and perhaps to the translator's own opinions and values. The result could be a re-aristocratization of non-aristocratic models, as I elsewhere tried to demonstrate in the case of the Swedish *Valentin och Namnlös* (Ferrari 1994).

Gutenberg's invention of the movable type printing and the evolution of the class composition of the Scandinavian societies brought about, after only a few decades, a new, thorough reorganization of the Scandinavian literary systems. The bourgeoisie was now able to afford the purchase of chapbooks, and the printers appropriated the narrative patterns of canonized chivalric literature in order to satisfy the demands of a new readership. These texts enabled this new readership to enter the fictional world of the ruling class and, at the same time, to enjoy the intricacy of their plots and the exoticism of their descriptions. In this way, the need for entertainment was satisfied and, at the same time, the bourgeoisie had the possibility to identify itself with the values and the way of life of an aristocracy which had progressively lost its military functions and had turned to a political and administrative elite (Rasmussen 1990).

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