

## **Translation, Encyclopædia Britannica** (11th edn., Cambridge, 1911), vol. xxvii, pp. 183–6

Translation – literally a carrying over or transference from one to another, and so from one medium to another. [...] But the commonest sense of the word is in connexion with the rendering of one language into another.

[...] Dryden has prescribed the course to be followed in the execution of the ideal translation: ‘A translator that would write with any force or spirit of an original must never dwell on the words of his author. He ought to possess himself entirely, and perfectly comprehend the genius and sense of his author, the nature of the subject, and the terms of the art or subject treated of; and then he will express himself as justly, and with as much life, as if he wrote an original; whereas, he who copies word for word loses all the spirit in the tedious transfusion.’

Comparatively few translators have satisfied this canon. A writer capable of attaining the standard set up by Dryden is naturally more disposed to use his powers to express his own views than those of his foreign predecessors. No doubt at all times, and in all countries, translations have usually been produced for utilitarian purposes, and not from artistic motives. In the first instance we may assume that translations were undertaken in a spirit of educational propaganda as a means of communicating new ideas and new facts to a somewhat uninstructed and uncritical public, indifferent as to matters of form. But, though the translator’s primary motive is didactic, he is insensibly led to reproduce the manner as well as the matter of his original as closely as possible. [...] As it happens, however, the task of translating foreign masterpieces has frequently been undertaken by writers of undisputed literary accomplishment whose renderings have had a permanent effect on the literature of their native country.

It was certainly the case when Rome, having conquered Greece, was captured by her captive. There is much point and little exaggeration in the statement that ‘when the Greek nation became a province of Rome, the Latin literature became a province of the Greek’; and this peaceful victory was initiated by a series of translations made by writers of exceptional ability and, in some cases, of real genius.

The first translator whose name is recorded in the history of European literature is Livius Andronicus, a manumitted Greek slave who about 240 BC rendered the *Odyssey* into Saturnian verse. This translation, of which some fragments are preserved, was long in use as a school text, for Horace studied it under the formidable Orbilius; but Andronicus appears to have recognized his mistake in using the native Latin measure as a vehicle of literary expression, and is said to have rendered Greek tragedies and comedies into metres corresponding to those of his Greek originals. The decision was momentous, for it influenced the whole metrical development of Latin poetry. The example set by Andronicus was followed by Naevius and Ennius, both of

whom laid the foundations of the Latin theatre by translating Greek plays—especially those of Euripides—and naturalized in Rome the hexameter, which, as practised later by Lucretius and Virgil, was destined to become ‘the stateliest measure ever moulded by the lips of man.’ The tradition of translating more or less freely was continued by Pacuvius, the nephew of Ennius, as well as by Plautus and Terence, whose comedies are skilful renderings or adaptations from the New Attic Comedy of Philemon, Diphilus and Menander. A persistent translator from the Greek was Cicero, who interpolates in his prose writings versified renderings of passages from Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides which prove the injustice of the popular verdict on his merits as a poet. [...]

The knowledge of Greek declined with the empire, and translations were accordingly produced for the benefit of students who were curious concerning the philosophic doctrines of the Athenians and the Neoplatonists. Porphyry’s introduction to Aristotle’s *Categories* was translated by Victorinus about the reign of Julian the Apostate; at the end of the 5th century this introduction was once more translated by Boetius, whose translations of Aristotle’s *Categories* and other logical treatises began the movement which ended in establishing the Greek philosopher as the most profound and authoritative exponent of intellectual problems during the middle ages. [...] ... the interest in Aristotle extended to the East, and in the 6th century he was translated into Syriac by Sergius of Resaina. The Syrians acted as interpreters of Greek learning to the Arabs, and during the 8th and 9th centuries—chiefly through the staff of translators organized at Bagdad by Honein ibn Ishak—the works of Plato and Aristotle, as well as those of Hippocrates and Galen, were translated into Arabic. These translations are of capital importance in the history of European thought. Many of them were introduced into Spain by the Arabs, and were rendered—in some cases through the intermediary of a Castilian-speaking Jew—into Latin at the college of translators founded in 1130 (or shortly afterwards) at Toledo by Raymund, archbishop of that city.

Circulating widely throughout western Europe, these Latin translations supplied the learned with a third- or fourth-hand knowledge of Greek philosophy. When Albertus Magnus, St Thomas Aquinas, or any other early light of the schools refers to Aristotle, it must be borne in mind that he often had no more exact acquaintance with the text which he expounds or confutes than could be gathered from an indirect Latin version of an Arabic rendering of a Syriac translation of a Greek original. This accounts for many misunderstandings and errors which would otherwise be incomprehensible. Among the earliest European translators who made their way to Toledo were Adelard of Bath, who rendered an Arabic version of Euclid into Latin; the Englishman known as Robert de Retines, afterwards archdeacon of Pamplona, the first translator of the Koran, which he did into Latin in 1141–1143 by order of Peter the Venerable; and Gerard of Cremona, who,

towards the end of the 12th century, was responsible for over seventy translations from the Arabic, including Ptolemy's *Almagest* and many of Aristotle's treatises, as well as works by Galen, Hippocrates and Avicenna. [...] Within half a century of the conquest of Constantinople in 1204 a visit to Spain was no longer indispensable for a would-be translator of Greek philosophical treatises. The original texts slowly became more available, and a Latin translation of Aristotle's *Ethics* seems to have been made from the Greek by order of Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, between 1240–1244. Towards the end of the century the indefatigable William of Moerbeke (near Ghent)—mentioned as 'William the Fleming' by Roger Bacon—produced, amongst numerous other Latin renderings from the Greek, versions of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Politics* which have commended themselves to more exact scholars of the modern German type. The Latin renderings from the Arabic were current till a much later date; but it was henceforth accepted, at least in principle, that translations of the Greek classics should be made direct from the original text.

Meanwhile the work of translating foreign productions into the local vernacular had been begun in the north and west of Europe. Towards the end of the 9th century an illustrious English translator appeared in the person of King Alfred, who rendered St Gregory the Great's *Cura pastoralis* into West Saxon 'sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense.' Alfred is also regarded, though with less certainty, as the translator of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and the *Historia adversus paganos* of Orosius. The version of St Gregory's treatise is the most literal of the three; omissions are frequent in the renderings of Bede and Orosius, and in all the diction is disfigured by latinisms.

A larger conception of a translator's function is noticeable in Alfred's version of Boetius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, a famous Neoplatonic treatise which was the delight of the middle ages, and was translated later into German by Notker Labeo, into French by Jean de Meung, and twice again into English by Chaucer and by Queen Elizabeth respectively. In translating Boetius, Alfred deals more freely with his author, interpolates passages not to be found in the extant texts of the original, and yet succeeds in giving an adequate interpretation which is also an excellent specimen of English prose. If the alliterative verses found in one manuscript of Alfred's translation are accepted as his work, it is clear that he had no poetic faculty; but he has the credit of opening up a new path, of bringing England into contact with European thought, and of stimulating such writers as Werferth, bishop of Worcester—the translator of St Gregory's *Dialogues*—to proceed on the same line.

[...] St Gallen became a centre of translation, and there, at the beginning of the 11th century, Notker Labeo presided over a committee of interpreters who issued German renderings of certain treatises by Aristotle, Terence's *Andria* and Virgil's *Eclogues*. [...]

... in the meanwhile, as the younger European literatures grew in power and variety, the field of translation necessarily widened to such an extent that detailed description becomes impossible. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, which purports to be a free version of an unnamed Breton book, is the source of the Arthurian legends which reappeared transformed in elaborate French versions, and were transmitted to the rest of Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries. During this period of French literary supremacy instances of bilingual faculty are not wanting in the form of translations: shortly after the middle of the 13th century Brunetto Latini translated passages of Cicero into Italian, and selections from Sallust into French. A hundred years later there are unmistakable indications that the middle ages are departing, that the French suzerainty over literature is at an end, and that the advent of the New Humanism is an accomplished fact.

The early Renaissance had already dawned in Italy: a renewed interest in the Latin classics (Greek was not yet generally cultivated by scholars) proved that there was a revival of learning in France. [...] In England Chaucer executed translations of Boetius and part of the *Roman de la rose*, and succeeded equally in interpreting the philosophic treatise and the allegorical poem. A still further advance is discernible in the book of travels ascribed to Sir John Mandeville: this work, which seems to have been originally written in French, is rendered into English with an exceptional felicity which has won for the translator the loose-fitting but not altogether inappropriate title of 'the father of English prose.' The English version of Mandeville is assigned to the beginning of the 15th century. About 1470 Sir Thomas Malory produced from French originals his *Morte d'Arthur*, a pastiche of different texts translated with a consummate art which amounts to originality. Malory's inspired version, together with the numerous renderings from the French issued (and often made personally) by Caxton, stimulated the public taste for romantic narrative, raised the standard of execution, and invested the translator with a new air of dignity and importance.

Yet the 15th century has a fair claim to be regarded as the golden age of translation. The Gothic version of the Bible, made by Ulfilas during the 4th century almost simultaneously with St Jerome's *Vulgate*, is invaluable as the sole literary monument of a vanished language; the 14th century English version by Wycliffe and the 15th century English versions which bear the names of Tyndale and Coverdale are interesting in themselves, and are also interesting as having contributed to the actual Authorized Version of 1611. But they are incomparably less important than Luther's German translation of the Bible (1522–1534) which, apart from its significance as indicating the complete victory of the liberal middle class and the irremediable downfall of the feudal and ecclesiastical autocracy, supplanted minor dialects and fixed the norm of literary

expression in German-speaking countries. Luther, it has been truly said, endowed Germany with a uniform literary language, a possession which she had lost for nearly three hundred years. [...] ... France had produced a prince of translators in Jacques Amyot, bishop of Auxerre. [...] Amyot's translation of Plutarch (1559) remains an acknowledged masterpiece, surviving all changes of taste and all variations of the canon of translation.

[...]

A translator of the rarest excellence was forthcoming in Sir Thomas North, who rendered *Guevara* (1557) from the French ... , and *The Morall Philosophie* of Doni— 'a worke first compiled in the Indian tongue'—from the Italian (1570). But, good as they are, both these versions are overshadowed by the famous translation of Plutarch which North published in 1579. He may have referred occasionally to the Greek, or perhaps to some intermediate Latin rendering; but the basis of his work is Amyot, and his English is not inferior to the French in sonority and cadence of phrase. This retranslation of a translation is a masterpiece of which fragments are incorporated with scarcely any change in *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*; and touches from North have been noted also in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* and in *Timon of Athens*. Amyot greatly influenced the development of French prose, and his translation was the source of Racine's *Mithridate*; but, if we reflect that Shakespeare not only took some of his subjects from the English Plutarch and found nothing to amend in the diction of many passages, North's triumph may be reckoned as even more signal than Amyot's. Very little below North's translation of Plutarch comes John Florio's translation of Montaigne (1603), a fantastically ingenious performance which contributed a celebrated passage to *The Tempest* and introduced the practice of the essay into England. It is impossible to cope with the activity of English translators during the last half of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th. To this period belongs Chapman's impressive and resounding translation (1598–1616) of Homer, which was to enrapture Keats two hundred years later. Adlington's version of Apuleius, Underdown's renderings of Heliodorus and Ovid, the translations of Livy, Pliny, Suetonius and Xenophon issued in quick succession by Philemon Holland are vivid and often extravagantly picturesque in their conveyance of classic authors into Elizabethan prose. [...]

Among the multitudinous English translations of the 18th century it is only necessary to mention Pope's versions of the *Iliad* (1715–1720) and the *Odyssey* (1725–1726) and Cowper's rendering of Homer, issued in 1791. These neat translations necessarily fail to convey any impression of Homer's epical grandeur, and they set a mischievous fashion of artificial 'elegance' which has been too often adopted by their successors; but both Pope and Cowper conform faithfully to the mistaken canon of their age, and both have fugitive moments of felicity. [...]

The most remarkable translations of the 18th century, however, appeared in Germany: these are the versions of the *Odyssey* (1781) and *Iliad* (1793) by Voss, and A.W. von Schlegel's rendering of Shakespeare (1797–1810), which gave a powerful impulse to the Romantic Movement on the Continent.

Byron's version of a Spanish ballad and Shelley's renderings of *Caldero'n* are interesting exhibitions of original genius voluntarily accepting a subordinate role. [...] Versions of Dante by Longfellow (whose translations of poems by minor authors are often admirable), of Latin or Greek classics by Conington, Munro, Jowett and Jebb, maintain the best traditions of the best translators. [...]

Most versions of modern foreign writers are mere hackwork carelessly executed by incompetent hands, and this is even more true of England than of France and Germany. But, with the development of literature in countries whose languages are unfamiliar, the function of the translator increases in importance, and in some few cases he has risen to his opportunity. Through translations the works of the great Russian novelists have become known to the rest of Europe, and through translations of Ibsen the dramatic methods of the modern stage have undergone a revolution.