Introduction

This book explores the particular nature of vernacular translation, or *volgarizzamento*, in Italy in the time of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. While Italian literature, whose origins are squarely in the thirteenth century, is often described as 'belated', translation into Italian vernaculars, which begins at exactly the same time, has been admired as 'precocious'. Elsewhere in Europe translation and commentary are associated with institutions and patronage, but in Italy around the time of Dante, widespread vernacular translation is mostly on the spontaneous initiative of individuals. Moreover these translations, which are largely anonymous and almost all in prose, are not finished works, but rather works in progress, as can be seen in their intricate manuscript tradition that comprises multiple versions and traces of interventions by many hands. Notaries, bankers and merchants of the northern Italian communes, whose dependence on the written word was unprecedented, became engaged in the transcription, domestication and circulation of ancient and foreign literature. As with the Internet today, Italians' sudden and wide access to reading and writing in this period had the effect of turning readers into writers. Vernacular translation, like Wikipedia, was an environment that lent itself to contributions *by* readers.[1]

The phenomenon of vernacular translation in the first period of Italian literature (1250–1350) has been called 'oceanic'. Of the 134 vernacular manuscripts dating from before 1350 catalogued in a recent census of the national library in Florence, 97 of them have content that can be described as volgarizzamento of classical or medieval material. It is perhaps not surprising that 72 per cent of a vernacular literature so close to its origins would be derived, indeed translated, from other sources. As Gianfranco Folena points out, new literary traditions tend to begin with translations: there are no absolute beginnings. Even so, the imposing proportion of translated literature does give a different picture of the textual landscape of the time than does the typical literary history

dedicated primarily to works of original composition. The handwriting of the manuscripts gives a window not only onto their copyists, but also their readers. It was really at this time and place, as Armando Petrucci has observed, that writers and readers began to be the same people. Of the ninety-seven manuscripts of vernacular translation in the national library, sixty-nine are written in *littera textualis* (a hand used by bookmakers), thirty-five in *bastarda* (used especially by notaries), and five in *mercantesca* (a handwriting developed specifically for the necessities of commerce and accounting by and for merchants without any facility in Latin). As Teresa De Robertis points out, these five volgarizzamenti indubitably penned by merchants are a suggestive indicator of a vocational predilection for translated works, since there are only a total of seven manuscripts in *mercantesca* of any vernacular literature before 1350 preserved in the library.[2]

This explosion of translation activity was directly connected with social, religious, political and economic practices in Italy. Notaries were daily translators, mediating between a legal culture in Latin and the vernacular society regulated by them. But so were the mendicant preachers who vulgarized scripture in their sermons, some of which were the first vernacular sermons to be transcribed in Europe. The first explicit art of letter-writing (*ars dictaminis*) had been articulated in Italy in the thirteenth century. Guido Faba's proposal of vernacular formulas for use in letters alongside Latin exemplars early in the Duecento prompted Cesare Segre to consider volgarizzamento as a mentality in Italy even before it became a practice. Urban Italy was a land of writers. As Leon Battista Alberti would say, assessing this culture from the vantage point of the fifteenth century, the good merchant always has his hands stained with ink. Merchants and bankers kept records in register-books that would eventually become small libraries of vernacular texts. Notaries filled in the blank spaces of the Bolognese public records with contemporary lyric poems. It was also a land of speech-makers. Because of their practice of public harangue, the ruling class of citizens of Italian republics had a particular interest in accessing the rhetorical arts and obtaining model speeches in a language they could use. The involvement of *illiterati* – that is, people not trained in Latin – with the written word was key to the demand for translated texts in Italy in this period. Vernacular translation makes it possible for the illiterate to read.[3]

Volgarizzamento is a term for translation not entirely translatable into English because it indicates a very clear hierarchical relation between the target and the source language. Even in the so-called 'horizontal' transfer

between French and Italian in this period, the move is between an already well-established literary language and one that is not yet. For us translation is 'news from abroad' or the 'circulatory system of the world's literature'.[4] We think of translation as a communication between different cultures from disparate geographical regions. But vernacularization of Latin literature was not so much an importation of something foreign as a shift in register and social class – from the clergy to the court or, in Italy, to the semi-literate well-off citizens of the city-states for whom written and oral eloquence in the vernacular had practical political, commercial and ethical purposes. Perhaps because such a transfer occurs within a single cultural context, there is some hesitance to call it translation at all. Claude Buridant calls Latin-to-vernacular transfer a *transposition intralinguale* from a language of culture to a language of diffusion. Such a definition makes it possible to consider all manner of medieval apparatus to ancient authoritative texts, such as commentaries, compendia, florilegia and glossaries, a kind of 'vulgarization' even without recourse to any of the vernaculars. Pushing it further, it has been suggested that *any* text written in medieval Latin ought to be deemed a 'translation'.[5]

If all of medieval culture is implicitly or explicitly engaged in the adaptation and appropriation of ancient models in what is generally referred to as the *translatio imperii et studii*, then everyone in this vast project of 'cultural reclamation', from the humble scribe who transmits a work of antiquity, to the medieval compiler who adapts older material to a new narrative, allegorical or didactic purpose, can be considered a translator.[6] Still more generally, the poet Novalis, praising Schlegel for his translations of Shakespeare, observed that, 'To translate is to produce literature, just as the writing of one's own work is – and it is more difficult, more rare. In the end, all literature is translation.'[7] It has even been possible to say that all human understanding, even apart from literary or documentary expression, is the result of the 'translation' of external things into one's own personal idiom.[8] Translation studies today, especially with regard to the relationship between cosmopolitan languages and vernaculars, has become an important field of inquiry for scholars of non-European cultures, concerned about the fate of diverse vernaculars in a globalized world. In the genre of 'cultural translation studies', translation is used to describe cultural exchange that is not necessarily linguistic, such as the 'translation' of persons in phenomena of immigration and exile. Harish Trivedi suggests that post-colonial studies has effectively 'colonized' the term 'translation' for use in a monolingual sense.[9]

It would seem that everything can be called translation except, oddly, vernacular translation. Benvenuto Terracini, for example, declared that in the Middle Ages there was no translation, strictly speaking, but only volgarizzamento. This is perhaps because translation is predicated on the equal status of source and target, and in the Middle Ages Latin had no peer. The vernaculars were not standardized, were not taught in school and were subject to constant variation in place and time. Indeed it has been said that the vernacular is not a language at all, but a relationship between languages. Vernacular translation both enacts and undermines that relationship by presuming to offer equivalents across a linguistic and cultural divide. As to the notion that medieval Latin apparatus is already a form of 'vulgarization', it is worth underlining the difference between a 'nativized' language of medieval Latin used to explicate ancient authorities to a professional class of scholars, on the one hand, and the vernacular that makes these same authorities accessible to merchants, bankers, artisans and women, on the other.[10] Until it becomes a successful literary language, the vernacular is severely limited in geographical and chronological reach. Because it is, precisely, not a cosmopolitan language, as Sheldon Pollock defines Latin or Sanskrit, 'written to be readable across space and time', the choice for the vernacular amounts to 'renouncing the larger world for the smaller place'.[11] Yet Pollock uses the term 'vernacularization' not for renditions of specific texts into another language, but for all expression in a new literary language which he sees always as a deliberate and conscious act of cultural transfer (and hence, in the wide sense, translation).

In this book the terms 'translation', 'version', 'vulgarization', 'vernacular translation' and 'vernacularization' will be used as equivalents of volgarizzamento, since it is all those things.[12] What is lost in these English renditions of the term is the odour of vulgarity associated with the language of the *volgo*, the humility of the genre, the intent of popularization (*divulgazione*) and the effect of what is feared to be a concomitant debasement of the authorities in the interests of their dissemination among a less learned, less 'subtle' class of people. The editors of a recent anthology of medieval English discussions about the choice for the vernacular contend that the modesty of these writers, even as they submit their work to improvement by its eventual readers, is but a topos, and the 'anxiety' of writing in the lesser language but a trope.[13] I contend on the contrary that the anxiety of volgarizzamento was quite real, as Pollock has also insisted, and that it led eventually to an abandonment of vernacular translation towards the end of the fourteenth century. Early Italian

translators can seem of two minds about their project: on the one hand confident that their task will be useful; on the other concerned about the betrayal that translations inevitably entail, especially between the language of the *dottori* and that of common, unlearned, so-called 'illiterate' men or, even, women. Women were a geniune motive for vernacularization, as well as a convenient excuse, so that this anxiety often takes a gendered form that I argue is as real and unrealistic as the concerns motivating successive sumptuary laws in the same period (Chapter 1).

The paradox of vernacular translation is that it aims to educate the uneducated through a medium that remains irreducibly *of* the uneducated. That is to say, these are not primers for students in the process of getting an education; rather they are a compromise substitute for real learning, directed at those people who cannot or will not become learned in Latin letters – because of their vocation, their class or their sex. Although children learned their letters through Latin schoolbooks and psalters, that does not mean they could read ancient or even medieval Latin fluently.[14] At the same time, the intensely documentary culture of the city-states and their commercial and financial activities required widespread engagement with the written word, producing a habit of reading and writing also in the vernacular.

In its first phase, volgarizzamento is a practice of 'domestication' rather than 'foreignization'. This is true in France where the transfer of classical literature 'into romance' meant an adaptation to a modern literary genre as well as a shift in language. Early Italian translators were equally interested in finding modern equivalents for ancient terms, but their almost exclusive use of prose suggests not only that they lacked a comparable indigenous literary tradition in which to convert ancient material, but that their intent was primarily explicative. Early translators were less interested in how the Romans differed from the moderns than in the connections and commonalities between the two. Roman history, especially in Italy, was considered 'our' history. Whatever the fundamental cultural differences between contemporary Italy and ancient Rome, or between the Italian republics and the French courts, vernacularization effectively muted them. So too did translations of religious texts, including the Bible, render them less sacred, more on a par with other edifying literature.

Volgarizzamento, like other forms of medieval translation, is essentially an exercise in commentary, adapting an unchanging authoritative text to changing circumstances.[15] As James Zetzel has observed, while the scribe of a manuscript by an *auctor* 'was constantly trying to reproduce a text

that had been composed centuries earlier', the scribe of a commentary 'was trying to keep what he wrote up-to-date and useful. He wrote for the present, not to preserve the past . . . Preserving the continuing vitality of one text necessarily meant constant alteration of the other.' Zetzel remarks, moreover, that 'medieval exegesis is one of the kinds of text – ancient legal writing is another – in which even a pre-modernist may legitimately question the stability of the concept of "text" itself'.[16] James Boyd White reminds us that even today legal writing is just as much a problem of translation, essentially because the law, which is fixed and written, when applied to new contexts has always to be translated into the current situation, made relevant to immediate needs. He writes that 'the process of giving life to old texts by placing them in new ways and in new relations is of course familiar to us as lawyers'.[17] Pollock observes that vernacularization – which for him means the literization of a spoken tongue – typically occurs in documents before it is used in literary expression. Although that does not seem to be the case with the literization of Italian vernaculars, much of the earliest Italian literature is attributed to notaries, protonotaries and judges. As we have already observed, notaries were translators by profession since they had to interpret a growing legal documentation to an 'illiterate' population increasingly dependent upon it.

Because volgarizzamenti function like commentary, they are particularly liable to accretion, reduction and reuse, which makes their textual tradition exceedingly intricate. This is true even of so-called 'artistic' translations that are just as eagerly mined for relevant material in subsequent compilations and updated to reflect a changed environment of reception or changed knowledge about the source text, its language and its culture. Although commentary may sometimes substitute itself in practice for a distant and obscure source, as Rita Copeland has suggested, vernacular translations in Italy remain ancillary and radically mobile.[18] The great majority are anonymous and in prose, faithful to their models to the point of being dismissed as excessively subservient. At the same time, since their aim is clarity rather than fidelity, they often abbreviate, interpolate and, by following more than one exemplar, contaminate. There is a freedom in vernacular translation written in *lingua soluta*, unfettered by meter, rhyme, any rules of grammar (since the vernacular was thought to have none), or the requirement to remain within what the text actually says. This gives not only translators, but their copyists – people who transmit the text – an extraordinary degree of licence. Once the text has been translated by someone who knows both languages, such

as a notary or mendicant preacher, it becomes possible for and even in a sense incumbent on successive reader-writers to update the translation according to a changed audience or a better understanding. The majority of Italian volgarizzamenti are eminently provisional, inviting and receiving continual revision. Volgarizzamento is a phenomenon of reading and reception. It is not about substituting itself for authority, but rather about keeping the authorities up to date.

Only after the period of Latin humanism, with its project of translating into Latin from Greek, will the goal of vernacular translation be limited to putting into one language only what somebody said in another, without any scruple to explain what he meant. Gianfranco Folena argues that the modern notion of translation, together with a new word – *traducere* – came out of Leonardo Bruni's reflections on his experience of translating between the two grammatical languages, Latin and Greek. When, after its abandonment in the fifteenth century, volgarizzamento returns as an acceptable literary endeavour for the intellectual elite, then it does become an instrument of cultural prestige and state propaganda. In other words, it is only after the eclipse of the original volgarizzamento movement by humanism that in Italy there begins to be the sort of vernacularization that is taken as typical of the pan-European movement that Sheldon Pollock, for example, describes as enabling and accompanying the 'production of the nation-state'. For Pollock, European vernacularization in fact replicates the spread of Latin: a function of the power and violence of a conquering state that 'decapitated' the indigenous culture. But because the earliest vernacularization movement in Italy had no sponsoring state, it resembled much more what Pollock has to say about the spread of Sanskrit: that it never theorized its own universality and came into being not through political domination but through 'the circulation of traders, literati, religious professionals, freelance adventurers'.[19]

Volgarizzamento implies a transfer not just between two authors (a writer and a translator), but between categories of people – 'da gente a gente', as Terracini put it.[20] Yet in Italy in the fourteenth century, it was not a nationalistic project as it was for Arabs after the seventh century, who were 'among the first in history to establish translation as a government enterprise', or for King Alfred in ninth-century England, or for Alfonso X of Castille in the thirteenth century, or as it would be in the translations sponsored by Charles V in France before his death in 1380.[21] Even though Tuscan is the dominant target language of the surviving translations, this is due to production and consumption, rather than an agenda of cultural prestige as it would be in later fifteenth-century

Florence on the initiative of Lorenzo the Magnificent. And while the vernacularization movement is often said to be 'decisive' for the development of Italian prose, its purpose was not (as it would be later for the humanists putting Greek authors into Latin) to demonstrate the vigour of the target language. While it is true that Dante expressed a nationalistic desire for the promotion of his mother tongue and that it was seconded to some extent by Boccaccio, Dante disdained the prose vernacularizations of his day and Boccaccio, who may well have produced some, certainly never admitted as much. Dante was moreover not writing in or for a state, but in its lamented absence and from his own exile.

The *volgarizzatore* and the humanist both aim at the communication of ancient culture to the present, but the former does so by bringing the text closer to the modern reader while the latter insists on the reader moving, through training in Latin grammar, closer to the text. Ronald Witt has argued that vernacular translations delayed the development of humanism in Florence by making authors accessible without readers having to learn Latin. For the humanists all translations were inadequate because they considered the wisdom of the ancients to be 'encoded in the fiber of the language'.[22] Vernacularization was in that context antagonistic to the humanist movement and its philological approach to texts. Rather than trying to make the ancients accessible to the moderns by updating their language, humanists insist on readers equipping themselves in an archaic or artificial language in order to be able to converse on a level with the ancients, as Petrarch was the first to do. The humanist puts on 'regal robes' in his approach to ancient literature, as Machiavelli says of his own evening reading in a famous letter, whereas an 'illiterate' reader like the protagonist of a novella by Sacchetti, enabled by vernacular translation, drags the *auctoritates* through the muck of the present-day world (Chapter 1).

The impulse of volgarizzamento and that of philological precision are diametrically opposed. The term 'vulgate' is in fact used of versions of a text that are not critically aligned as closely as possible with the origins of a text but, on the contrary, are the most widely disseminated, most popularly consumed. Employing philological principles of collation and emendation, Petrarch was the first to try to reconstruct the surviving 'decades' of Livy, thereby repairing what he lamented as the damage of centuries of lazy and illiterate readers. For Boccaccio (if it was he) to produce a vernacular version of Petrarch's labour (in the volgarizzamenti of the third and fourth decades) was to go exactly against the philologist's enterprise by putting the painstakingly restored 'original' back into the

hands of illiterate, and therefore presumably lazy, readers. What the vernacularization of the reconstructed Livy epitomizes is the contemporaneity of the two movements – one bringing authors down to readers, the other bringing readers up to authors.

On the other hand, Witt suggests that volgarizzamenti prepared the ground by making the authors they translated familiar to upper-class families who would eventually be persuaded to give their sons a humanist education.[23] Yet when the tools of modern philology introduced by the humanists are applied to 'vulgar' translations that were of no interest to them, it is possible to trace how the scruples of the Latin philologists in fact grew out of repeated efforts to translate ancient authors into the vernacular. In his examination of the various versions of Livy and the vernacular glosses to Valerius Maximus, Giuliano Tanturli has shown how the constant updating of volgarizzamenti produced, as he calls it, a 'sedimentation of culture', so that the latest *volgarizzatori* are in fact the first humanists, whose growing awareness of the alterity of ancient history, religion and mores made them increasingly dissatisfied with vernacular equivalents. Over time, the *volgarizzatori*, particularly when they go back to retranslate things that were already translated a first time, tend to restore the original Latin word or to use (or coin) a Latinism that works in the vernacular but clearly recalls the foreign term behind it – *repubblica* instead of *comune*, *milite* instead of *cavaliere*, and so on. This retrieval of Latin is in part an awareness of difference, as opposed to a presumption of continuity, between the ancient and modern worlds, and shows an effort to press the vernacular into another mould. In effect it is translation that moves away from translation, back towards the source.

The story of volgarizzamenti is the story of people trying to understand, and it leaves traces of many a misunderstanding, corrected not so much by any individual pedant (say, Giovanni Boccaccio) but by the force of many readers over time. Volgarizzamento contains the seeds of its own destruction, because the desire for greater understanding of content leads ultimately back around to a desire for a greater understanding of the source language, and less tolerance, in the end, for translation because it necessarily misconstrues. Vernacular translation puts the venerable and unchanging *auctores* into words that are local, of the moment, inherently updatable and hence ultimately forgettable. At the other end of the fifteenth century, the Neapolitan librarian, Giovanni Brancati, decries the inevitable obsolescence of vernacular translations. It is a work demanding infinite labour, promising little or no glory, that in very few months will be forgotten, if not trampled underfoot.[24] Proof of short shelf-life is the fact that Brancati

himself was asked to retranslate Pliny's *Natural History* which Cristoforo Landino had finished putting into Tuscan only a brief time before.

The infinite perfectibility of translations was obvious to readers of early versions who were accustomed to encountering regional differences in language that copyists sometimes 'corrected' by their own lights to suit their own time and place, but sometimes let stand. This tolerance for difference meant that Italian copyists could also transcribe entire texts in a *volgare* not their own, although they often left behind their own linguistic patina. In the case of franco-veneto, this imperfect transcription or incomplete translation led to the emergence of a hybrid language used only in literature. There is a poignancy to the early volgarizzamenti, whose protestations of inadequacy and fears of betraying the source are as real as any translator's today but, in addition, whose target language was a virtual guarantee of their works' short life. That they survived to be studied as historical artefacts has to do with circumstances unforeseeable from the perspective of their making: that is, the solidification of Tuscan as a standardized and ultimately national language for Italy.

Rita Copeland argues that translation was not just central to medieval literary practice but that it was an expression of the newer culture's will to substitute itself in place of the older, more venerable one; the 'chief maneuver' of vernacular translation was to displace its Latin source. Like many histories of vernacular translation in Europe, Copeland traces this Oedipal desire in English literature back to Dante whose ambition to become a vernacular auctor, as Albert Ascoli has recently demonstrated, was portentous.[25] The recent *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* covers vernacular translation and commentary in English, French, German and Spanish literary traditions in one chapter, whereas the new theories of the relationship between Latin and vernacular in Italy are the subject of a chapter of their own – beginning, of course, with Dante. Yet Dante's effort to confer authority on himself and on his language was not generally shared by the numerous and mostly anonymous producers of volgarizzamenti. The vernacular translators of Dante's day had no explicit agenda of fortifying this or that mother tongue, but only to make useful knowledge available to those to whom it would otherwise be inaccessible. I argue in Chapter 5 that Dante is working against the grain of the vernacularization movement all around him, condemning Brunetto Latini as its epitome. His vision of translation has much more in common with the modern notion of a 'transformation of one text into another' held by the likes of Steiner, Borges and Benjamin than with the prosaic 'transfer of a text from one language to another' that describes most volgarizzamento of his contemporaries.[26]