

Introduction
Translation as Reception

Two kinds of images populate this book: images of cultural authority, such as the portrayal of the philosopher Aristotle enthroned, and images of cultural debasement, such as the depiction of the philosopher Aristotle mounted and thus reduced to servitude by the courtesan Phyllis. While they belong to different and independent iconographic traditions, the first kind functions as the premise of the second, which, in turn, reverses the assumptions embodied by the first. One celebrates Aristotle as an outstanding cultural authority, while the other shows him deprived of his authoritative status and transformed into a common man vulnerable to the tricks of life. The two images, both very popular in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, are emblematic of the dynamics that informed the reception of Aristotle in the period, particularly where vernacular translation is concerned. Indeed, the fall of the philosopher from his chair captures the gradual appropriation of Aristotle's legacy on the part of the new reading publics that shaped the vernacular cultures of Europe between the age of Dante and the advent of print.¹

As Erich Auerbach argues, lay readers from the period's aristocratic and mercantile elites catalysed the production and consumption of vernacular literatures.² While Auerbach's theory remains compelling, more can be said, and indeed needs to be said, about the ways in which readers engaged (or aspired to engage) in the making of vernacular literature. The primary contention of this book is that, between 1250 and 1500, translation

¹ For the notion of 'reading public', see the recent discussion of the term in Miglietti and Parker (2016). For details about the two iconographies of Aristotle (enthroned and mounted by the courtesan), see Chapter 1.

² Auerbach (1965); beyond Auerbach's reflection on the formation of vernacular audiences in medieval Europe, invaluable insights into the social dimension of vernacular literature and its circulation in the Middle Ages are those by Monfrin (1963, 1964).

offered vernacular audiences a particularly productive space for interaction with both the medieval academic tradition and humanist scholarship. Translation was not only concerned with the appropriation of values but also with the gradual establishment of linguistic tools able to express and communicate those values. Accordingly, through the practice of translation, a prominent place was given to the ethical dimension of language and its uses.

Translation is taken here and throughout the book in the broad meaning of the original Latin *translatio*, a meaning (or rather a cluster of meanings) that the vernacular cultures of medieval and early modern Europe inherited from antiquity.³ With its focus on the idea of transference, the term entails processes of transformation, adaptation and reshaping – the same processes that are at the core of reception in its many forms. A further, implicit contention of the book, then, is that translation is not only a form of reception (and so forms a crucial subfield in the broader area of reception studies) but that it is a necessary precondition of reception.⁴ One could even say that, no matter what media are involved in the process, there is no reception without translation and vice versa. Or, to put it in Rita Copeland's terms, the process of displacement entailed by translation is always set in motion by a moment of receptiveness.⁵ If an act of translation is responsible for shaping a given image of Aristotle, this is only possible because of the way in which the translator has received the conceptual elements that constitute the image itself, including pre-existing iconographic traditions, iconology, as well as the variety of narratives that relate to these.⁶ At the same time, the very act of receiving an object (either textual or visual)

³ The broad meaning of the term *translatio* is suggested by the etymology of the word as described by, among others, Isidore of Seville and, closer to the period that is examined here, Huguccio of Pisa; see Cecchini and Arbizzoni (2004), s.v. 'translatio'. On the reception of the classical notion of *translatio* in the Latin Middle Ages, see Chiesa (1987); for a discussion of the notion of translation between Latinate and vernacular cultures in the Medieval period, see Copeland (1991); for a special focus on the Italian case, Dionisotti (1967), Folena (1991), Gehl (1994) and Cornish (2011). State-of-the-art collections of essays on early modern cultures of translation are Newman and Tylus (2015) and Den Haan, Hosington, Pade and Wegener (2018); a recent discussion of vernacular translation in fifteenth-century Italy is Rizzi (2017).

⁴ For recent developments in the area of reception studies, stemming from the seminal contribution of Martindale (1993), see Hardwick (2003), Martindale and Thomas (2006), Porter (2008) and Butler (2016).

⁵ Copeland (1991: 35): 'the translator performs an act of aggressive interpretation so as to lay open his language and usage to receive a formative influence. We might recall here the paradox in imitation theory whereby the copy both stamps its impress upon the model and receives that model's impress upon its own features ... In a sense, translation asks for a similar moment of appreciative desire and receptiveness.'

⁶ For the distinction between iconography and iconology, see Panofsky (1955), Gombrich (1972) and Taylor (2008).

inevitably entails an act of translation. What might sound like an inconclusive circle involving translation and reception proves instead a productive way to rethink the relationship between the two. Indeed, the impasse is broken when one considers both translation and reception as intimately related to interpretation (a relationship that, as we shall see, is embedded in the medieval etymology of the Latin word for translator: *interpretres*).⁷ By including interpretation in the analysis, it is possible to shed light on the peculiar way in which translation and reception relate to each other. In fact, translation and reception, both involved with interpretation, can only be distinguished from one another artificially. Nevertheless, as the case studies discussed in this book show, they do not entirely coincide.⁸ Rather, by regarding them as informing one another, I shall offer an interpretive model in which translation fulfils its function through reception and reception contributes actively to the translation process.

If this book will take ‘translation’ in its broad sense, including forms of adaptation, abridgment and rewriting, ‘reception’ will first and foremost be taken in its literal meaning (i.e., *to receive* something), with a special focus on the materiality of the reception process. Yet, by receiving an object (textual, visual, or a combination of the two) the reader/observer is involved in a complex process in which the object is not simply ‘received’: rather, it is brought to life. To be more precise, this is a process in which the object is described, retold, eventually translated into one of its possible lives.⁹ Indeed, the ways in which cultural objects are received (i.e., constructed as objects of interpretation) depend on the context of reception, which is defined by factors as diverse as chronology, geography, politics, society, gender and, not least, language, all factors that are key not only to reception but also to translation.¹⁰ Enhancing the gap that separates any form of reception from its apparent object, these factors challenge the utopian desire to recover the past that is at the core of traditional ideas about translation.¹¹ From this point of view, the understanding of reception central

⁷ On the relationship between translation and interpretation, see Martindale (1993: 86–94).

⁸ A similar point about the mutual (but only partial) overlapping of translation and reception has been made recently with regards to contemporary literary translation; see, for instance, Zhou (2013) and D’Egidio (2015).

⁹ For the idea that reception is key in making the meaning(s) of a text, see Martindale’s reassessment of Jauss’ theory in Martindale (1993: 11–13); cf. Martindale (2006: 4–5).

¹⁰ As suggested by Stanley Fish in a statement that captures many arguments entailed by reception theory, linguistic and textual facts are not the objects of interpretation, but their product; in the same vein, Fish stressed the role of ‘institutional’ contexts in the production of meaning. See Fish (1980).

¹¹ On the utopian dimension of translation, Venuti (2012: 11–31).

to recent developments in reception studies performs a corrective action on enduring but untenable tropes of faithfulness in translation and the recovery of an alleged ‘original’.¹² At the same time, reception offers a manageable grid to tackle the scepticism that, in the aftermath of Walter Benjamin’s famed essay on the translator’s task, has informed modern conceptions about translation and its impossibility.¹³ Indeed, if Charles Martindale is right in suggesting that any object from the past, any study of which necessarily constitutes an act of reception, is elusive, the same can be said about translation.¹⁴ In attempting to reconstitute an object across contexts, translation faces the unattainability of the object itself, which, by being translated, becomes a different one.

Translation, therefore, materialises the difficulties and epistemological ambiguities entailed by reception in two ways.¹⁵ First, the translator receives what he or she constructs as a ‘source’ and then acts as a medium between that source and a new audience. In this respect, the medieval etymology of the Latin term for ‘translator’, *interpretes*, is instructive. As suggested by the combination of the preposition *inter* (‘between’) and the word *praes* (which, according to the medieval etymological interpretation, means ‘mediator’ but also ‘rich in spoils’), the act of linguistic mediation can be described as a way to move riches (i.e., words) from one language to another.¹⁶ The point was made explicitly by etymologist Huguccio of Pisa at the beginning of the thirteenth century:

Pres (‘mediator’) is compounded [i.e., forms compound words] if it is taken as *dives* (‘rich’), such as in *interpretes*. *Interpres* is someone who knows several languages, that is, someone who explains a language by means of another or transfers one language into another; and they have this name because they mediate between one language and another; or [one could say that the word *interpretes*] is based on *pres*, which means ‘rich’, because translators enrich languages by transferring words from one language into another.¹⁷

¹² Faithfulness and fidelity are the most common criteria evoked in discourses about translation throughout the ages. On their problematic status, see Hurtado Albir (1990), Venuti (2000; 2017: 14, 18, 30).

¹³ For the text of Benjamin’s essay *The Task of the Translator* (1923) and relevant bibliography, see Venuti (2000: 15–23).

¹⁴ For a discussion of translation within his wider reflection on reception, see, in particular, Martindale (1993: 75–100).

¹⁵ On the epistemological challenges posed by reception, see Butler (2016).

¹⁶ The medieval etymology of the word *praes* differs from the currently accepted one, which goes back to the Sanskrit *prath* (= to spread abroad). I wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point.

¹⁷ Cecchini and Arbizzoni (2004), s.v. ‘interpretes’: ‘Pres componitur, secundum quod accipitur pro dives, hic et hec *interpretes* -tis, et dicitur interpretes qui diversa genera linguarum novit, scilicet qui unam linguam exponit per aliam vel unam linguam transfert in aliam, et dicitur sic quia mediator

The triangular relationship involving the source, the translator and the target language is not simple after all. In fact, the translator's work is the result of a process of reception that, while cutting through previous layers of reception, is necessarily influenced by them. As Martindale stresses, 'the translated text is already an interpretation ... since translation depends on prior reading practices'.¹⁸ Consequently, the translator's targeted audience receives a 'translated' object that is not simply the product of the translator's own reading of the source but the result of earlier processes of reception (what Martindale himself calls 'chain of receptions') that translation inevitably assimilates.¹⁹ Yet, as I aim to show in this book, it is exactly the progressive overlay of 'prior reading practices' as well as the networks of such reading practices (prior, contemporary and future) that contribute to making translation an elusive goal.

Second, the mutually determinant nature of translation and reception affects the way in which the source is received by and through the translator's work, as well as the way in which a given translation is received by its immediate and later audiences.²⁰ Thus, translation is not a simple act of reception, but it becomes essential to the reception process as a whole. Considering translation accordingly, not as a synonym but as an analogous term for reception, I aim in this book to stress the role that reading practices play in translation, particularly in contexts in which the readership takes an active part in facilitating and shaping the process of translation, as well as in promoting the translation's dissemination. In fact, as I have done regarding the concept of translation, I shall take 'reading' too in a broad sense, ranging from commissioning and owning a book to taking notes in the margins or even selecting material to copy into a miscellaneous notebook.²¹ Similar forms of active reception are fuelled by translation and, in turn, nourish translation, creating the linguistic conditions for the appropriation, adaptation and (re)construction of the past.

The vernacular reception of Aristotle, whose philosophical authority reigned unparalleled from the mid-twelfth century to the threshold of modernity, is a case in point. Latin translations of Aristotle's works made

est inter unam loquelam et aliam; vel componitur a pres quod est dives, quia interpretes ditant loquelam, transferentes vocabula de una loquela in aliam.' On the Latin terminology of translation (*translatio*, *interpretatio*, *tractatio*), with a special focus on its medieval and early modern legacy, see Folena (1991).

¹⁸ Martindale (1993: 13).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 29.

²⁰ For a stimulating discussion of 'how to read a translation', see Venuti (2012: 109–15).

²¹ Classical studies on the history of reading are Iser (1978), Eco (1979), Fish (1980), Darnnton (1990), Chartier (1994), Grafton (1997) and Blair (2010).

between 1150 and 1250, the corpus known today as ‘Aristoteles Latinus’, turned the philosopher into the supreme embodiment of pagan wisdom. Aristotle appeared in this capacity in painting and sculpture across the Middle Ages and the early modern period, while his works became the backbone of university education, providing Europe with a system of knowledge that would last for centuries.²² Though hindered at first by the ecclesiastical authorities because of controversial statements on topics like the immortality of the soul and the eternity of the world, Aristotle’s thought became one of the pillars of Christian culture, thanks to the interpretive effort of philosophers such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, who reconciled his thought to the principles of Christian theology. In academic contexts in this period, Aristotle spoke Latin, and he would continue to speak Latin for a long time, either the ‘rough’ Latin of the scholastics or, starting around 1400, the ‘polished’ classicising Latin of the humanists. The new wave of Latin translations of Aristotle’s works promoted by early fifteenth-century intellectuals such as Leonardo Bruni challenged the scholastic approach to language, particularly its lack of expertise in classical style, but did not question the priority of Latin as the language of knowledge *par excellence*.²³

At the same time, Aristotle’s *auctoritas* had been seeping through lay culture, where Latin was gradually making room for the vernacular and the vernacular was finding ways to acquire the status of a literary and philosophical language. (Here and throughout the book I will prefer the Latin *auctoritas*, to be understood as ‘authoritative and supposedly reliable source’, over the ambiguous and potentially misleading English equivalent ‘authority’).²⁴ Two contexts are particularly indicative of this transformation: the court and the city-state. In both, though in different ways, translation worked as an intermediary between Latinate academic discourses (both scholastic and, later, humanist) and their reception on the part of vernacular consumers.²⁵ Either perceived as an inevitable alternative

²² For an introduction to the recovery of Aristotle in the medieval West, see Dod (1982), Lohr (1982) and Brams (2003). On the establishment of Aristotle as the core of the university curriculum, see Lines (2002); for a general overview on medieval universities across Europe, see Janin (2008); with a focus on Italian universities in the Renaissance, Grendler (2002).

²³ Recent discussions of humanist opinions on the status of the vernacular vis-à-vis Latin are Maxson (2013) and Rizzi (2013). For further details, see Chapter 4 in this book.

²⁴ For the problems entailed by the notion of ‘authority’, see Kojève’s seminal study of 1942, now Kojève (2004); more specifically on the culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Von Leyden (1958) and Brownlee and Stephens (1989).

²⁵ On the mediation between academic practices and vernacular cultures facilitated by translation in conjunction with a renewed interest in the inventive function of rhetoric, see Copeland (1991).

or boisterously promoted as a positive tool to reach out to a larger number of readers, the ‘vernacularisation of Latin literature’, as convincingly argued by Alison Cornish, ‘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’.²⁶ A few examples will illuminate this shift.

When the Prior General of the Augustinian Hermits, Giles of Rome (c. 1245–1316), was asked by the king of France Philip III to write a government handbook for the dauphin (the future King Philip IV), the renowned commentator of Aristotle reworked the *Ethics* and the *Politics* into one of the most popular mirrors of princes in history.²⁷ In 1280, when the *De regimine principum* was published, one would never have expected a prestigious scholar like Giles to stoop to writing a philosophical treatise in the vernacular. And yet, within less than two years, the king commissioned from Henry de Gauchi a translation of the text into the dauphin’s mother tongue. The king’s request suggests that the royal household was not at all insensitive to the advantages of reading in one’s own language. The dedicatee had excellent Latin, as stated by French poet Jean de Meun in his translation of Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae*, also written for Philip IV, but the very fact that the translation was commissioned suggests that he would have found a vernacular version easier to read.²⁸ The translator’s justification of his work, where the translation is presented as a mere gesture of courtesy for the prince, reiterates a common prejudice about linguistic hierarchies, according to which the vulgar tongue submits to the prestige of Latin. At the same time, it witnesses the progressive legitimization of the vernacular, which, through translation, was appropriating themes and discussions usually restricted to the Latinate elites. In this respect, the case of Giles’ *De regimine principum* is exemplary: the original Latin version circulated widely among Latinate readers across Europe, but a concurrent and broad circulation of the text was made possible by vernacular translation.²⁹

²⁶ Cornish (2011: 3); see also Gehl (1994) for a discussion of the notion of cultural hierarchy entailed by medieval theories and practices of translation.

²⁷ For an overview of the life, career and production of Giles of Rome, see Briggs and Eardley (2016); on the *De regimine principum* specifically and its wide circulation, Briggs (1999a).

²⁸ Jean de Meun’s statement is discussed in Copeland (1991: 134).

²⁹ On the vernacular reception of Giles’ treatise, which was translated into several languages beyond French, see Briggs (1999a); of particular interest is the 1288 Italian version of the text, which was translated from Gauchi’s French; cf. Papi (2015, 2016).

In the 1280s, Philip IV's amour-propre still required vernacular translations made for him to be excused. Within less than a century, things had changed considerably. One of his successors, Charles V, asked philosopher Nicole Oresme to provide the royal library with a French translation of Aristotle's main works of moral philosophy (*Nicomachean Ethics*, *Economics*, *Politics*).³⁰ Oresme's gigantic enterprise, completed in the early 1370s, had a limited circulation, with the beautifully illuminated copies of the Aristotelian translations functioning more as tokens of cultural prestige and political power than as books actually to be read.³¹ Still, the king's desire to make Aristotle speak French was rich in political and ideological implications. The vernacular frame of the gift strengthened the status of French not only as the language of the nation but also as a language suitable for philosophy and thus a language that could equal the prestige of Latin. Furthermore, by receiving Aristotle's works in his own mother tongue, the ruler put himself in the position that had been Alexander the Great's, who had Aristotle as his mentor. The translator stood as proxy for the author/teacher, while the patron adopted the role of the ancient ruler/student.

The gratifying and self-celebratory analogy with Alexander the Great built on Alexander's relationship to Aristotle, which occupied much space in the broad tradition of narratives about the life and deeds of the ancient king.³² Among them, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secret of Secrets* held a special place.³³ The spurious work, allegedly sent by the philosopher to the young ruler, covered a variety of subjects, most of which pertained to morals, politics and government, including a very popular section on physiognomy, which had a successful life of its own. The text, more rudimentary than Aristotle's genuine philosophical treatises and far removed from their speculative heights, was probably written in Arabic in the tenth century and translated into Latin in the mid-twelfth century, becoming very popular across Europe through various vernacular translations.³⁴ While the beautifully illuminated Aristotle produced for Charles V did not leave the king's library, the *Secret of Secrets* made it through much broader communities of readers who would read it along works of moral conduct and

³⁰ More in general on Oresme's contribution to late medieval theory and practice of translation, see Lusignan (1986: 154–66; 1988).

³¹ A detailed reconstruction of Oresme's endeavour in the light of the illuminated manuscripts of his Aristotelian translations made for the royal library is provided by Sherman (1995).

³² For an overview of the medieval literary representations of Alexander, see Stock (2016).

³³ See Grignaschi (1980), Ryan and Schmitt (1982) and Williams (2003b).

³⁴ Translations of the *Secret of Secrets* appeared in several vernaculars; for a discussion of the circulation of the text in the Romance area, see Cecioni (1889), Milani (2001), Rapisarda (2001), Williams (2003a), Zamuner (2005), Carré and Cifuentes (2010) and Lines (2019).

Christian devotion. It circulated as a repository of words of wisdom that, although often hardly related to genuine Aristotelian thought, contributed to the popular reception of the philosopher as an emblem of knowledge and intellectual authority.³⁵

A similar and possibly wider contribution to the vernacular reception of Aristotle came from a text that shared several analogies with the *Secret of Secrets*: the anonymous Arabic compendium of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which was translated into Latin by Herman the German around 1240 under the title *Summa Alexandrinorum*.³⁶ Soon translated into Italian by Taddeo Alderotti, a Florentine professor of medicine based at the University of Bologna, the compendium (commonly known as *L'Etica d'Aristotele*, 'Aristotle's Ethics'), was incorporated into Brunetto Latini's *Tresor* (c. 1260), one of the most popular encyclopaedias of the Middle Ages.³⁷ The *Tresor*, written in French during Brunetto's exile in France and translated into Italian shortly thereafter, was pivotal to the vernacular dissemination of a Christianised version of Aristotle's moral philosophy, and it was widely read well into the Renaissance. By presenting moral, political and rhetorical instructions as precious gems in a treasure chest, Brunetto shaped his translation project according to the commercial frame of mind peculiar to the mercantile culture of his time. The author of the *Tresor* thus fulfilled the function of the translator as described, as we have seen, by Huguccio of Pisa, according to whom the action performed by the *interpres* is accompanied by the transfer of 'valuable' words from one language to another, with the consequent enrichment of the target language.³⁸ When Brunetto, in the opening of the *Tresor*, compares knowledge to money and highlights that without money no transaction between men would be possible, he reveals that the work's primary scope is to outline practical principles for social interaction.³⁹ The *Tresor*, with the compendium of Aristotle's *Ethics* at its core, is not a simple collection of precious teachings but a statement about the role of language in any form of negotiation. With its focus on language and knowledge as tools for mediation, the *Tresor* executes the very function of vernacular translation. Theoretical and practical philosophy

³⁵ Some examples of this process will be discussed in Chapter 4.

³⁶ This work and its vernacular dissemination will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

³⁷ See Bolton Holloway (1993), Beltrami (2007) and Cornish (2011: 126–57).

³⁸ Similar ideas about translation were not new; for their presence in classical theories of translation (Cicero in particular), see chapter 4 in McElduff (2013).

³⁹ Beltrami (2007: 4): 'Et si come sens deniers n'auoit nulle moieneté entre les heuvres des genz, qui adreçast les uns contre les autres, autresi ne puet nus hom [s]avoir des autres choses pleinement se il ne set ceste premiere partie dou livre'.

along with rhetoric are made available to vernacular readers as instruments to construct and consolidate communal life.

Despite the pattern outlined by the successful circulation and reception of works such as Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*, the development of vernacular literature, especially philosophical prose, was far from linear. Latin remained the preferred option for the international circulation of texts and ideas, and its use was powerfully revamped by humanism, the rise of which doubly complicated the relationship between Latin and vernacular.⁴⁰ On one hand, humanism vigorously reinstated the cultural prominence of Latin (i.e., the classical Latin of the ancients), thus challenging the use of both medieval Latin and the vernacular; on the other hand, humanism, thanks to the renewed knowledge of Greek, shaped itself as the one and only intermediary able to recover the classical past and translate it effectively into the present.⁴¹ The frictions produced by the humanists' approach to antiquity vis-à-vis scholasticism and, to a great extent, vernacular culture are particularly visible in the history of the reception of Aristotle, whose legacy was claimed by all parties.⁴² Examples of similar dynamics include, among others, Leonardo Bruni's own effort to make Aristotle a flagship authority of humanism, a cultural project that, as this book shows, did have important – though not uncontested – effects on vernacular culture.⁴³ Within such a picture, vernacular translation performed a mediation not only between past and present but also between the various players involved in the cultural and linguistic conflicts of the time.

As these few examples indicate, making Aristotle speak in the vernacular meant negotiating between academic prestige and the preoccupations of lay readers normally excluded from the Latinate consumption of knowledge. Vernacular translations of Aristotle in the period entailed inevitable processes of transformation that, in different ways, made the philosopher's teachings at once more accessible and more relevant to people's lives. The appropriation of the philosopher on the part of the vernacular audience came through the linguistic 'domestication' of academic knowledge (this was the case of Giles' *De regimine principum* and, as we shall see in this book, of several translations of Aristotle's works made between 1250 and 1500). But the process of appropriation was also fuelled from below, so to

⁴⁰ On the long history of Latin as a language of knowledge, see Waquet (2002).

⁴¹ For a wide discussion of the issues entailed by the humanist approach to antiquity, see Celenza (2018). On the ways in which humanists shaped their intellectual mission, see Baker (2015).

⁴² See Schmitt (1983), Lanza (1989), Kraye (1993), Witt (2000), Lines (2002) and Blum (2012).

⁴³ For a discussion of these aspects, see Chapters 3 and 4 in this book.