

Reviews

Brunetto Latini. *Le Livre du Trésor: Livre I.*

Ed. and trans. Bernard Ribémont and Silvère Menegaldo. Traductions des classiques du Moyen Âge 94. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2013. xc + 490 pp. €45. ISBN: 978-2-7453-2470-2.

The fame of Brunetto Latini's encyclopedic work *Le Trésor* (ca. 1260–65) rests mainly on its (probable) citation by Dante in *Inferno* 15. But the *Trésor* has much more to recommend it, especially to Renaissance scholars. Brunetto, a notary, provides a uniquely bourgeois perspective on late medieval knowledge culture, which emphasizes history, ethics, and rhetoric, while subordinating the natural sciences and *quadrivium*. The Florentine author wrote from exile in France and proudly presents his summa in Old French, presaging future debates on learning and the vernacular. His protohumanist vision of philosophy ensured the *Trésor's* influence well into the age of print.

Nowadays, however, Brunetto's multilingualism has left the *Trésor* somewhat outside the mainstream of literary scholarship, especially in his native Italy. The first Italian edition of the *Trésor* proper, as opposed to its near-contemporaneous Old Italian translation, the *Tesoro*, appeared only in 2007 (ed. and trans. Piero Beltrami et al). Before then, would-be readers encountered a Dantean dark wood. This side of 1900, they might consult Carmody's outdated critical edition of 1949, which lacks a translation, or else one of a series of works based on single manuscripts, notably Barrette and Baldwin's 1993 English translation, which offers a good introduction but scant other guidance.

Annotated translations of the *Trésor* are therefore welcome if they broaden access to Brunetto's erudition. By this measure, the volume under review is a qualified success. Ribémont and Menegaldo provide a highly readable modern French version of book 1 of the *Trésor*, which introduces the divisions of philosophy, then covers history and natural philosophy — a pairing Brunetto idiosyncratically dubs the “theoretical sciences.” Accompanying the translation are annotations, a bibliography, an index, and a substantive introduction, but no Old French original.

The translators, moreover, aim beyond accessibility. In his introduction, Ribémont moots the possibility of a “critical translation” (scare quotes original), which might “suggest multiple avenues of research on the traditions that feed into the encyclopedist's sources” (lxvii). This lofty ambition justifies what Ribémont himself calls a “very weighty critical apparatus” (lxvii). The apparatus was indeed too weighty for this reviewer: over 500 pages seemed an otiose length for a monolingual presentation of one of the *Trésor's* three books. By comparison, Beltrami et al. contains the whole *Trésor*, a translation, and a generous exposition in a single tome of 900 pages.

The excessive apparatus spoke to two concerns with the intellectual foundations of this translation. First is the characterization of Brunetto as an “encyclopedist” of the traditional stripe — explicit in the quotation above and implicit in the long passages from Latin encyclopedias that festoon the notes. Analogously, Ribémont defends sundering book 1’s “theoretical” content from the more didactic second and third books by claiming that it is “effectively its own complete encyclopedia” (xxxvi). This openly partial reading denies the *Trésor*’s reshaping of the largely ecclesiastical lore of Isidore, Vincent of Beauvais, and company into something novel: a treasury of civic wisdom for the lay mercantile intellectual.

Then there is the translators’ idealized understanding of the encyclopedia itself as a totalizing container of knowledge. This idealism licenses a reimagination of the source text: the translation selects underlying readings based on the manuscript tradition and scholarly discretion, implying a new but inaccessible critical edition. Ribémont and Menegaldo even seek to transcend the *Trésor*’s perceived limitations, reproving Brunetto for factual errors, correcting his misunderstandings of sources, and supplying further encyclopedic material that he could (should?) have incorporated (e.g., 440n126). The culmination is chapters 91–98, on the contentious topic of the recent history of the empire. The translators include these chapters, which appear in full only in certain manuscripts, even as their notes concur with Beltrami that the section is certainly not original and probably not authorial. It therefore seemed strange that they did not set the disputed material apart, perhaps in an appendix.

At such times, the work veered toward Charles Kinbote’s scholarship in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. Kinbote rewrites John Shade’s poem to fit an obscure and subjective motivation. Happily, Brunetto’s *Trésor* is second-language writing to rival Nabokov’s and this volume therefore remains helpful despite its shortcomings.

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