

Anne D. Hedeman. *Translating the Past: Laurent de Premierfait and Boccaccio's De Casibus*.

Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008. xvii + 280 pp. index. append. illus. tpls. bibl. \$60. ISBN: 978-0-89236-935-5.

This beautifully produced book reflects the high standards the Getty Foundation maintains in supporting the work of art historians and the art history books they produce. With over 100 color plates, and a number of them full-page, this book examines the artistic inventiveness, artistry, and hermeneutical and other purposes exhibited in the various illuminations of the manuscripts of

Laurent de Premierfait's fifteenth-century French translation of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, titled *Des cas des nobles hommes et femmes*.

Laurent completed his second translation of Boccaccio's text in 1409, having finished the first in 1400. In the prologue to the 1409 retranslation, Laurent explained that his word-for-word approach in the first attempt had failed and he chose amplification "with explanatory information" (11), which resulted in his successful second attempt that remains extant in fifty illuminated copies, the primary focus of this book. Advancing a theory of translation to accompany his text, Laurent wrote that the earlier version had "followed precisely and exactly the sentences taken from the author's own language, which is very subtle and artificial" (11). Appendix 6 in the book puts the three texts next to each other to demonstrate the differences. In his second attempt, he decided that "it was necessary that Latin books in their translation be transformed and converted into such language that their readers and listeners can understand the effect of the sentence without working too much or too long to understand" (11–12).

The book includes four chapters, an introduction, conclusion, and an impressive set of eight appendices, which provide important tools and archival information for further scholarship on, among other topics, the arrangement of the illustrations and John of Berry's gifts and commissions. The introduction deals with the classification of Latin and French texts in noble houses of the period and leads to the thesis of the book: "Laurent's visual and textual amplifications point to an ideal French humanist reader who would actively interpret the pictures in his manuscript as a guide to a modern, Christian, and specifically French reading of *Des cas des nobles hommes et femmes*. Laurent's efforts in shaping the manuscripts of his translations created an innovative humanist addition to the tradition of mirrors-of-princes literature in the early fifteenth-century" (5). Thus, the central argument is that the pictures are not just decoration; in offering a visual commentary on the contemporary significance of ancient stories to be "contemplated and valued" (5), they contribute an essential component to the education of the prince.

In chapter 1 of the book, Hedeman reviews the role of the patronage of Charles V (1364–80) in inaugurating a program of translation "designed to make available classical and medieval works" (90). This is followed by a discussion of "Laurent de Premierfait and Artistic Commissions before 1410," in which Hedeman successfully argues that in the "first decade of the fifteenth century, Laurent became increasingly committed to the rhetorical practice of textual amplification as a means of bridging the cultural gap between early fifteenth-century France, where his translations were first read, and classical Rome or fourteenth-century Italy" (23). This is one of Hedeman's most interesting arguments, because she is able to demonstrate that the illustrations, rather than being unintentionally anachronistic — making ancient figures look like French contemporaries — is intentional because the moral and political education of Laurent's readers depends on them seeing the ancient stories as relevant to their own moral and political practices. Chapter 3, "Retranslating Boccaccio's *De casibus*: The Formation of a Core Visual Cycle for the Princes of the Blood,"

continues the argument of the previous chapter but amplifies it by showing that the retranslation of the *De casibus* replaced the single illustration from the original translation to 147 and 153 miniatures (in the manuscripts for the dukes of Berry and Burgundy). Hedeman suggests this amplification was “designed to reinforce textual associations with powerful visual markers” (127). The final chapter deals with how Laurent’s list of directions for editions of *Des cas* began to circulate among artists and book publishers in Paris after his commission and collaboration ended. The conclusion returns to the role of Laurent’s “visual and textual amplifications” in supporting an ongoing French political agenda: claiming the history of the Bible and of antiquity as the prehistory of France (211). This important point clearly argues that in putting all the figures of Greece and Rome and the Bible in French dress and manner, while placing them in French settings, Laurent made the ancient past the French present.

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