

H-France Review Vol. 20 (March 2020), No. 51

Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du monde: version franco-italienne*. Edited and translated by Joël Blanchard and Michel Quereuil with Thomas Tanase. Geneva: Droz, 2019. lxvi + 800 pp. Bibliography, notes, index, list of weights and measures, maps. €18.80 (pb). ISBN 978-2-600-05900-8.

Review by Sharon Kinoshita, University of California, Santa Cruz.

“Pourquoi une édition bilingue de la rédaction franco-italienne?” ask Joël Blanchard and Michel Quereuil three quarters of the way into their introduction (p. xlv) to this facing page edition and translation (into modern French) of Marco Polo’s *Le Devisement du monde* (*Description of the World*)—the text usually, if erroneously, known in English as *The Travels*. The answer is that, though the text conserved in the manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France français 1116, has been edited several times in Italy, it has not been edited in France since 1824; furthermore, the only modern French translation accompanied by the original text—published by Pierre-Yves Badel in 1998—is based on a manuscript dating from the second half of the fifteenth century.[1]

Le Devisement du monde was composed by the Venetian merchant Marco Polo in collaboration with the Arthurian romance writer Rustichello of Pisa in 1298, when both were imprisoned in Genoa. They wrote in French—the vernacular most readily available (in this generation before Dante’s *Divine Comedy* elevated Tuscan to the status of a literary language) to Italians who chose not to write in Latin. Marco and Rustichello’s original is lost; of surviving manuscripts, the version generally acknowledged to be closest to the lost original is that contained in BnF fr. 1116 (commonly known as the “F” text), copied ca. 1310 in a grammatically ragged French strongly inflected by Italianisms. Soon after, the text was translated into Latin by a Dominican friar, Francesco Pipino, and then in and out of an array of vernacular languages, starting with Tuscan, Old French, and Venetian. Each new translation or recension might abridge, change, or augment the text on which it was based. Many modern translations, in English and other languages, often incorporate passages that postdate the original composition by as much as 250 years. Blanchard and Quereuil thus perform a considerable service in making the “F” text available in an attractive volume at an affordable price, together with a facing-page modern French translation.

The introduction is informative on several fronts. The first three sections give background on Marco Polo, the origins of the Mongol Empire, and “précurseurs” (p. xii), including the two Franciscans, John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck, who traveled to the court of the Great Khan in the mid-1240s and early 1250s, respectively, and who both composed accounts, in Latin, of their journeys. Turning to the text itself, the section “*Le Devisement du monde*, une

énigme littéraire” takes up the question of genre, underscoring that it is neither a merchant’s manual, nor a biography, nor an encyclopedia but a “récit géographique,” the first of its kind (p. xvii).

The principles of edition (pp. lv-lviii) are conservative. Without explaining how their principles compare with those of the three previous editions of the text (listed on p. lxi of the select bibliography), the editors make a point, in particular, of “respectant...les diverses imperfections linguistiques” of the text (p. lvi). Only in the case of more “flagrantes” errors (p. lvi)—a missing word, one word mistaken for another, superfluous words—have they amended the text directly, or in conformity with the evidence found in closely related versions such as the Tuscan (TA), French (Fr), Venetian (VA), and/or the Latin (Z), always signaling these interventions in brackets. Minor lacunae have been filled, again by consulting these other versions; other cases are marked by ellipses, since “il serait arbitraire d’inventer un texte qui ne serait présent dans aucun des témoins disponibles” (p. lvi). The scholar consulting the Franco-Italian edition, in other words, has reasonable access to the text as it actually appears in the fourteenth-century manuscript.

The same cannot be said for the modern French translation. There Blanchard and Quereuil have opted to make changes “[p]our le confort du lecteur” (p. lvi). For one thing, they elect not to maintain, “les mots de la famille de *merveille* que si le contexte leur donnait un sens positif, compatible avec le sens courant d’aujourd’hui” (p. lviii, emphasis added). This is, to say the least, a curious choice, since *merveille* (wonder, marvel, miracle) is a keyword in medieval culture in general and in the *Devisement du monde* in particular; to adapt this particular lexical item to modern sensibilities is to efface much of the affect Marco and Rustichello invest in the world beyond Latin Europe. Similarly, the language of the *Devisement du monde*, in keeping with the prose style of thirteenth-century romances like Rustichello’s own *Méliadus*, is formulaic and repetitive. The prologue opens, “Seingnors, emperaor et rois, dux et marquois, cuens, chevaliers et b[o]rgio[i]s, et toutes gens qe volés savoir les *deverses* jenerasions des homes e les *deversités* des *deverses* region dou monde, si prennés cestui livre et le faites lire, et chi troverés toutes les grandismes mervoilles et les grant *diversités* de la Grande Harminie et de Persie et des Tartars et Indie et des maintes autres provences, si con nostre livre voç contera por ordre apertement, et come meisser March Pol, sajes et noble citaiens de Venece, raconte” (p. 3, emphases added).

Diversity, as Simon Gaunt has shown, is one of the *Devisement*’s central preoccupations, as hammered home in the four repetitions of various forms of the word in the text’s opening sentence.[2] Blanchard and Quereuil translate, “Empereurs et rois, ducs et marquis, comtes, chevaliers et bourgeois, messeigneurs, et vous tous qui désirez vous informer sur les *diverses* populations et sur les *curiosités* des *diverses* régions du monde, prenez ce livre et faites-le lire: vous y trouverez toutes les extraordinaires merveilles et la grande *singularité* de la grande Arménie, de la Perse, de la Tartarie, de l’Inde, et de bien d’autre pays; notre livre vous l’exposera de façon ordonnée et véridique, conformément au récit de messire Marco Polo, sage et noble citoyen de Venise” (p. 3, emphases added).

Substituting “curiosities” and “singularity” for two of the four occurrences appeases the modern ear by diluting the obsessiveness of the original. Similarly, the repetition in two occurrences of the formulaic phrase “Or dit li contes” (“Now the tale says”) (pp. 153, 657), a staple formula of Arthurian prose romance, is lost when it is rendered “Le récit dit ici” (“The narrative here says”) (p. 152) on one occasion and “Si l’on en croit l’histoire” (“If we believe the story about this”) (p.

656) on another. Finally, Blanchard and Quereuil have in places dressed up the *Devisement's* rather homely vocabulary, transforming the “chanbre” (rooms) found in ships into “cabines” (cabins) and the “ongle” (nails) of “grant serpanz” (crocodiles) into “griffes” (claws) (pp. 438-39, 322-23). While perhaps of less importance to those mining the *Devisement* for the raw content of its account of Asia, much cultural information is lost in the process.

The select bibliography (p. lxi-lxvi) is separated into a section of recent editions and translations (including digital versions) and selected studies. This latter section contains a mix of general and more specialized works in French and English. The English-language entries are primarily historical studies on the Mongols or different aspects of the thirteenth-century world; notably absent are recent Anglophone studies on cultural and textual questions such as those of Thomas T. Allsen,^[3] Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Amilcare A. Iannucci,^[4] and Simon Gaunt.

The notes to the translation (pp. 683-778), as one might expect, are largely devoted to identifying the various people, places, flora, and fauna mentioned in the text and to supplying historical context. Many notes are taken from Philippe Ménard's edition of the medieval French translation^[5] and from René Kappler's translation of the Franco-Italian version, supplemented by borrowings from Latin (Z) and Italian (R) versions.^[6] Other studies referenced in individual notes include classic studies or translations by Jean-Pierre Pauthier and Paul Pelliot, as well as an assortment of more recent studies, and even a 2016 police thriller by French author Ian Manook featuring a Mongolian detective.

The index of proper names (pp. 779-92) is keyed to chapters rather than pages. The short list of weights and measures (p. 793) is useful, though it might perhaps have included currencies as well. Six maps are given (pp. 795-800).

Overall, while the modern French translation should be used with caution, this volume's edition of the “F” text is a very welcome addition to available resources on Marco Polo.

NOTES

[1] Marco Polo, *La Description du monde*, ed. and trans. Pierre-Yves Badel, Lettres Gothiques (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1998).

[2] Simon Gaunt, *Marco Polo's Le Devisement du Monde: Narrative Voice, Language and Diversity*, Gallica (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013).

[3] Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[4] Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Amilcare A. Iannucci, eds., *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

[5] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du monde*, 6 vols., gen. ed. Philippe Ménard (Geneva: Droz, 2001-2008).

[6] Marco Polo, *La description du monde*, trans. R. Kappler (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale Editions, 2004).

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ISSN 1553-9172