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H-France Review Vol. 23 (June 2023), No. 111

Zrinka Stahuljak, *Les fixeurs au Moyen Age: Histoire et littérature connectées*. Paris: Seuil, Series l'Univers Historique, 2020. 195 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. €20.00. (pb). ISBN 9-78-2021440744.

Review by Anna Klosowska, Miami University.

A literature historian who was a war interpreter at the frontlines, Zrinka Stahuljak uses medieval texts to reflect on protections for interpreters in conflict zones and bring more public awareness to the fate of interpreters left behind in Afghanistan after the 2012 withdrawal of French NATO forces. As Stahuljak explains, some 4000 French NATO forces employing some 800 Afghans were present in Afghanistan from 2001-2013. Starting in late 2012, 217 Afghan translators received French visas, but 73 applicants were denied. Later, thanks to pressure from journalists, 252 additional dossiers were deposited and 101 received visas. The total is not close to 800. Protections for interpreters in conflict zones, moreover, vary and there is a need for more adequate international protection for those alienated from their country of origin by their work.

Making the Middle Ages relevant to the present, Stahuljak explored these issues in four Collège de France lectures (2018) and the corresponding volume *Les fixeurs au Moyen Age*, published at the invitation of Patrick Boucheron, the history series editor at Seuil.[1] Stahuljak's small but dense 200-page volume discusses aspects of translation and the work of the medieval (and modern) interpreter or *fixeur* (fixer). The book is divided into four sections organized by concepts rather than geography and chronology: bodies and networks, loyalty, gift, and fixer states. Using the term *fixeur* to denote a function rather than a profession, Stahuljak reminds us that *fixeurs* are pilots, guides, drivers, negotiators, and assistants. This broader definition is important because the UN, for example, restricts protection to those who act exclusively as language interpreters, a hypocritical distinction, since, as Stahuljak observes, interpreters during wartime are inevitably part of the war.

While *Fixeurs* also cites the translation from Latin to French, crusade/mission/pilgrimage literature, and narrative geography in general, the core of the book relies on a selection of French, Italian and Latin texts that mention Arabic-speaking *fixeurs* during the Mamluk period (1250-1500), the final centuries of the Middle Ages. A wide array of texts and themes are sampled and explored in *Fixeurs*: fiction; the campaign of translation of scientific works from Augustine to Aristotle from Latin to French under Charles V; travel narratives including merchants' and pilgrims' itineraries; crusade and mission literature along several axes including the economy of the ultimate sacrifice or open-ended gift/rash boon/*don contraignant*; the distinction between state and empire; conversion in the economic and religious sense; courtesy, hospitality, and

bribery; institutions and ethics of fixer states and empires, including late medieval Venice and Burgundy. *Fixeurs* also evokes interpreters: Marco Polo, Nicole Oresme, Leo Africanus; concepts such as *lingua franca*, *translatio* in the sense of the passage of knowledge, and the idea of the empire from Greek and Arabic to Latin and French; vocabulary, e.g. dragoman/truchemanni/turcimanni, *Latinier* in Old French, *interpres* in Latin, *calamanci* in Tartar; the person—always a man—who often knows many languages and who passes from being perceived as Muslim to Christian and back with equal skill.

*Fixeurs* thus illuminates the trajectory of the history of the Mediterranean in the 1300s-1400s. States or city-states such as Armenia, Venice, and Burgundy specialize as fixer states, that is, intermediaries. These travel narratives connect Burgundy, Cologne, Tuscany, Venice, and the Christian communities throughout Dar al-Islam and the Mediterranean: Alexandria, Cairo, Sinai, Jerusalem, the Galilee, Damascus, Beirut, Cyprus, Antioch, Edessa, Tripoli, Cilicia, and Armenia. Stahuljak notes that crossing the Mediterranean almost amounts to an “organized tour” (voyage organisé) of these cities during the period after 1330. In the 1400s-1500s, Stahuljak turns to Burgundy. Although defeated by the Ottomans at Nicopolis in 1396, the Burgundians later appear in Rhodes, Cyprus, and Ceuta. The duke adopts the title Great Duke of *Ponant* (i.e., West) in 1461, not long after the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire (1453). Burgundy has no single capital (the court moves around), no king (it is ruled by a duke), no unifying language or name. Burgundy is an empire, not a state, says Stahuljak, which helps explain the popularity of the legend of Alexander at the Burgundian court.

These texts are only sampled in *Fixeurs*, but their fuller story is fascinating as well. Take the fifteenth-century German traveler Arnold von Harff, who left an illustrated *Reisebericht* represented by numerous manuscripts including one of two known early Albanian lexicons as well as Breton, Croatian, Turkish, Basque, Hebrew, Arabic, Hungarian, Syrian, Amharic, and Armenian lexicons and alphabets. As often in travel writing, von Harff freely incorporated other sources—texts, images and alphabets—which experts trace to Marco Polo, Ptolemy, and popular contemporary printed German pilgrimage literature. [2]

A through-line of *Fixeurs* is the contrast between the empire and nation/state. Consider, for example, the lists of writing and language systems in the Mongol empire—Tartar, Turkic or Uighur, Sino-Persian, Franco-Italian—contemporary with Marco Polo’s *Devisement du monde* or “catalogue” of the world. Marco Polo and his collaborator Rustichello erase the intermediary, the fixer; we are led to believe there were no fixers between Marco Polo and his interlocutors. Is there a new, universal ethics in the fully “convertible” world created by Marco Polo, a world that is almost aggressively not believable precisely because of the absence of points of orientation or fixed markers, or fixers themselves? In the *Devisement* everything seems seamless, creating a distinct feeling of unreality or fiction, an impression we all share when reading this text with students. I would even say there is a hint of panic at the seamlessness of Marco Polo’s world, the very definition of Freudian *unheimlich*. Reading Marco Polo, even at a remove of seven centuries, is to find a world that is almost but not quite right.

Quite apart from that sleight of hand, historians have learned to dehumanize the past, with the best Marxist intentions, to study “market demand” instead of the specific situation of the person who commissioned the text. Conversely, *Fixeurs* asks us to use primary sources to document the biography and positionality of the fixer. Continuing with Marco Polo, a delightful passage concerns the role of paper money and universal currency. Paper money is the only universal

language of the Khan's vast empire that encompasses four great language groups and a mutually unintelligible variety of languages and alphabets.

Economic conversion has a sinister side, but more chilling still is the prospect of universal religious conversion. Medieval travel accounts are generally divided into two categories: military reconnaissance in view of future wars and trade and pilgrim itineraries in search of indulgences. *Fixeurs* follows that distinction in discussing crusade treatises and some travel narratives as military reconnaissance or know-how (*pratiques de savoir*). Raymond Lull, who translates his own *Ars magna* (1275-1305) into Arabic in Genoa (1291, now lost), advocates learning the languages of the colonized people as a first step in eliminating cultural and religious differences. The chilling ideal of a universal, seamless Christian empire with one God and no schism is palpable in these ghostly pages.

Stahuljak also reflects on the category chaos, affective chaos, and truth-value chaos that result from one's positioning as an interpreter. The fixer is an interesting case for subject and network theory. She reflects on Walter Benjamin's "The task of the translator" (1923) and commentaries on that text by Jacques Derrida and Antoine Berman. Since the point of a work of art is not primarily the content, what is translation? And, what is translation for Cicero and Jerome?

Stahuljak is one of the rare medievalists who can make travelogues and expense sheets meaningful to a mainstream public. In the main portion of the book, Stahuljak's expertise as an insightful and thorough philologist illuminates passages of works that must have been laborious reading. These texts include (among many other expense, reconnaissance, and pilgrimage accounts): Pierre Dubois (1250-1320) who recommends that both men and women learn Latin, Greek, Arabic and Persian ("Chaldean"); Simon de Saint Quentin (1247), on the Dominican Ascelin of Lombardy's mission to Baiju/Baiču, a general in Northwestern Iran and cousin of Čingis Khan's general Jebe; Fidence of Padua (1291, *Book of the Recovery of the Holy Land*); Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (1300-92, *Peregrination*); Antonio de' Reboldi (1330, *Itinerary to Mount Sinai*); and Leonardo di Nicolo Frescobaldi's remarkable *Viaggio d'Oltremare/Viaggio in Egitto e Terra Santa*.

*Fixeurs*, a book that samples sources, is not a book that was ever intended, given its short length and vast breadth, to be cited as a final word by experts or used uncritically by students. Playing "gotcha" with the primary sources sampled here, i.e. assigning students to research in depth the current state of the field on their chosen title, date, author or reference may turn out to be fun and instructive for the class. That is because, as Stahuljak reliably shows, there are many discrepancies and factual errors circulating in print in this growing field. For example, Stahuljak shows that the travelogue by Giorgio de Gucci regarding the voyage of 1384 was mistakenly attributed by its editor Alessandro Bedini in 1999 to another traveler, Simone di Gentile Sigoli. In other words, the primary sources used in *Fixeurs* and their current critical editions are a tangled mess. As a result, not all the field's errors can--nor should one frankly expect them to--be footnoted within the 200-page scope of *Fixeurs*. For example, Stahuljak mentions twelve Tuscans in that 1384 voyage and Christies' catalogue on the Frescobaldi manuscript sold in 1995 mentions thirteen. Again, these are texts that *Fixeurs* only samples in passing. Reading *Fixeurs* made me think that the field could use a book or a large collaborative project that, instead of sampling these texts as *Fixeurs* does, would offer an exhaustive catalogue of such texts, which is what Michael McCormick did in his *Origins of the European Economy* for the period 600-1000.[3]

Because these examples in *Fixeurs* are not chronological and are fragmented and sampled to illustrate the lines of inquiry listed above, the overall arc of Stahuljak's narrative does not emerge quite as clearly in this hundred or so dense pages and rereading them may be useful. As usual for Stahuljak, the theoretical framework centers on the conversation around 1970s French theory, e.g. Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin. In sticking to that plan—which is the author's prerogative—*Fixeurs* misses, in my view, an important opportunity for dialogue with current slavery, race, and decolonial studies that its primary texts call for. The sections on loyalty and gift would have benefited from that dialogue, as would the project as a whole.

But even in the absence of dialogue with current race studies, *Fixeurs* is a stimulating book. Thinking about politics, translation, and medieval history from the point of view of Stahuljak's *Fixeurs*—seamlessness vs. graininess, traction, “fixedness” of the world—has been an education. Stahuljak demonstrates that, in fiction as well as in terms of religion or commerce, hoping for a world that is a seamless continuum is wrong both ethically and aesthetically. And we benefit from thinking a lot more about the biography of the fixer, paradoxically named since he (here, exclusively he) enables flow and movement. Indeed, the fixer represents a special case for subject and network theory, a way to shed new light on history and theory of the subject and individual.

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#### NOTES

[1] For abstracts of the 2018 lectures see <https://www.college-de-france.fr/agenda/conferencier-invite/les-fixeurs-au-moyen-age>.

[2] See Mary Boyle, *Writing the Jerusalem Pilgrimage in the Late Middle Ages*, DS Brewer, 2021. On pilgrimage literature as simulacrum, see Anthony Bale, “‘ut legi’: Sir John Mandeville’s audience and three late-medieval English travelers to Italy and Jerusalem,” *Studies In The Age of Chaucer* 38 (2016) 201-237.

[3] Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300-900*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

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