

Mistranslation or Adaptation in Medieval Manuscripts: Can One Tell the Difference? *

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Sidrak and Bokkus is a fifteenth-century English verse translation of an Old French prose book of knowledge, *Le livre de Sydrac*. After an introductory story relating Sidrak's conversion of the pagan King Bokkus to a belief in the Trinity, the work reveals itself as a question-and-answer dialogue in which Bokkus plies Sidrak with a host of questions that have been troubling him. The work's remarkable contemporary popularity is shown by the number and distribution of surviving manuscripts in several European languages (over thirty in French; seven and several fragments in English; others in Italian, Danish, and Dutch: see *Sidrak* 1.xxxiixxxiii), its supposed authority by the usual subtitle in the French manuscripts, *La fontaine de toutes*

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sciences. It is a work of some importance in the history of European thought, providing evidence of the interests, attitudes, and beliefs of the late Middle Ages on almost every imaginable question from the visibility of God and the powers of angels to the cure for leprosy, the life expectancy of dragons, the best way to bring up one's children, and the copulation of dogs. In preparing a critical edition of the English *Sidrak* for the Early English Text Society, I encountered many passages in which the sense of the French had been altered in the English versions. Slight differences are of course inevitable in translating one language into another and in converting prose into verse; but some of the differences in the English versions of *Sidrak* are too great to be accounted for by either of these processes. In such cases one may be uncertain whether the differences are the result of mistranslation arising from misunderstanding of the original, or whether they arise from a conscious decision on the translator's part to alter the inherited meaning—to adapt rather than to translate. Is there any way in which one can tell the difference between inadvertent mistranslation and conscious alteration? This paper discusses three test cases encountered in the preparation of my edition of *Sidrak*. Each of these examples is concerned with matters of love, lust, and childbirth, on which topics King Bokkus has many questions to ask (see further Burton, “*Sidrak* on Reproduction”).

1

Question 59 in the English version asks (in Bodleian MS Laud Misc. 559): “Hou may e chylde, at ful of loue is,/ Come oute of e moderes wombe?—Telle me this” (*Sidrak* 1.196-97; 2.740-41). Readers of the

English who wondered what the child's love had to do with the matter might have been puzzled by the answer, which deals only with the mechanics of birth, making no mention of love. In this instance, the problem may be solved relatively easily by consulting the French original. In the earliest of the surviving French manuscripts (Bibliothèque Nationale MS fr. 1160, from which all quotations in French are taken) the question reads, "Coment l'enfes puet issir de la fame qui est plains des os en son cors?" (i.e., literally, "How can the child come out of the woman, who is full of bone in her body?"). It seems a reasonably safe assumption that the original English translation had "bone" for French "os", and that early in the transmission of the English manuscripts—sufficiently early for the error to have been reproduced in all of the surviving English copies—"bone" was misread as "loue" (i.e., "love"). This is an easy scribal error, with *b* read as *l* and *n* as *u*. We have here, then, neither mistranslation nor adaptation but straightforward scribal error.

But why did the translator say that it was the child that was full of bone when the original said that it was the mother? Is this error, or is it conscious change? The wording of the question in the French implies that the writer's concern is how a baby can escape from the hard-boned body of its mother without being damaged in the process. The answer is as follows:

La uertu de Dieu et son pooir est plus grans que ce et ensi com il a pooir de metre j cors dedins l'autre, il a bien pooir de faire le issir a sa volente, ou uif ou mort. La fame, quant elle veut fillier, toutes ses ioi[n]tes s'eslargent l'un de l'autre, saue le menton, par la uertu de Dieu. La dont le enfes ist par la force de Dieu fait com une figure de paste, et ensi tost com il flaire l'air de cest

sicle, par la uertu de Dieu, les os li endurent et deuenent ainsi come nous sommes, et la fame se clot sans nulle bleceure. Ensemens que se l'on tirast son doit en j escuele plaine de miel, deuant son doit au tirer s'ouiroit et desrieres se cloiroit comme se il ne fust onques riens thouchie. Ensement se clot la fame apres l'enfant ou point come se elle n'eust mie este ouerte ne n'eust fillie.

A literal translation of this passage (in so far as I have understood it) might run as follows:

God's strength and power is greater than this, and just as he has power to put one body inside the other, he has equal power to make it come out, at his will, alive or dead. When the woman wishes to give birth, all her joints enlarge, except the chin, by God's power. The place where the child comes out acts like a figure [made] of paste, and as soon as it [the child] breathes the air of this world, its bones harden by God's power, and they become just like us, and the woman closes without any wound. Just as, if one drew one's finger through a bowl full of honey, [the honey] will open in front of the moving of the finger and will close behind it as if it had never been touched. In the same way the woman closes after the child as completely as if she had not been open and had not given birth.

The explanation that the baby's bones don't harden until it comes into contact with the air implies that the comparison "com une figure de paste" is applied to the baby; yet the wording "La dont le enfes ist par la force de Dieu fait com une figure de paste" suggests that it is intended to apply to the mother's birth canal. It looks as if the English translator who wrote "the child that full of bone is" took the second of these possibilities from the answer (the child is bony, but the birth canal is pliable) and imported it into the question, replacing the apparent statement in the French question that it is the mother's body

that is full of bone. But when there are so many uncertainties in the original, it would be a brave (or a foolhardy) editor who claimed either that the translation was a misunderstanding or that it was a conscious adaptation. Here, I think, is an instance where one just cannot tell.

2

Question 214 in the English versions deals with love at first sight. The question (in British Library MS Lansdowne 793) reads, “Hou may a man loue a womman right/ Or she him tofore þe sight?” (For *tofore* Laud has *ffor*. If *tofore* is not simply an error, it must have the sense “in the presence of”, hence “because of”; see the note on this line in *Sidrak* 2.790.) The first part of the answer in Lansdowne reads as follows:

“Somtyme falleþ a man to mete
 A faire womman in þe strete:
 On hire his eighen he wole caste
 And biholdeþ hir ful faste 7700
 And þe eyghen present anoon right
 To þe eeris þat same sight;
 Þe eeris sendith it þe herte to
 And in delite he falleþ so
 And anne contynueth þat delite 7705
 And he bigynne to loue as tite.
 Þe eeris sendith to þe eighen aȝein.
 Þat of þat sighte þei ben ful fein
 And delite hem to biholde wel more
 And so þat þe herte anoon erfore 7710

Falle into foule likyng;
 And so bygynneþ þe loue to spring.” (Sidrak 2.452-55)

[7696 *falleþ*: it happens to; 7700 *faste*: steadfastly; 7706 *as tite*: quickly, at once; 7711 *likyng*: desire]

The Lansdowne manuscript presents falling in love as a complete sensory experience: a man catches sight of a beautiful woman; his eyes send messages to his ears; his ears send messages to his heart; he’s delighted and begins to fall in love; his ears send messages back to his eyes saying they like what they’ve seen (or heard?) and they want more of it; and—well, there we are. In the Laud manuscript, however, the ears have no part in this process: it’s the brain that is the intermediary between eyes and heart. This latter reading is borne out by the French, which has *ceruelle*, and is supported by the readings in two of the other English manuscripts containing this question: British Library MS Sloane 2232 (*braynes*) and Trinity College, Cambridge, MS O.5.6 (*harnys* = “brains”). The Lansdowne reading is clearly erroneous (though it makes a kind of sense); but where did its scribe find *ears*? The likelihood must be that *ears* is derived from an exemplar containing a form of *harnys*, the more usual spelling of which is *hernes*. Omission of the *n* (or of the superscript stroke commonly used as a contraction for nasals) would give a reading like *heres* or *heeres*; this in turn could easily be taken as a form of *ears* with inorganic *h-*. Alternatively *hernes* itself may have been taken to mean “ears” since (as Smithers points out) it exists with this sense in Middle English. In either case it is clear that what looks at first like a bold decision on the part of the Lansdowne scribe to change the

meaning of his exemplar turns out on inspection to be most probably the result of a misunderstanding in the copying of one English version from another: neither translation nor adaptation is in question here.

3

Question 260 in the English versions (275 in the French of MS fr. 1160) deals with the comparative sexual behaviour of men and women. The complete question and answer in MS fr. 1160 are as follows:

Li rois demande: “Qui puet plus souffrir de luxure l’ome ou la fame?” Sydrac respont (275): “La fame se puet mieus souffrir de ce fait que l’ome, car l’ome est de plus chaude complexion que la fame et celle volente est plus souent a l’ome que a la fame. Et la plus chaude fame dou monde est plus froide que le plus frois home dou monde; et por vne foiz que la fame se corront l’ome se puet corrompre xxvij foiz. Et de ce poiez veoir apertement car chascun foiz que l’ome se coste charnelment a la fame pou faut qu’il ne se corront; et en mult d’autres manieres se corront—d’empleure, de uision se puet corrompre. La fame ne se puet mie si souent corrompre, et de plusors foiz qu’elle acoste a l’ome a poines elle se puet corrompre vne foiz. Mais la fame est plus chaude de volente et de corraige en ce fait que l’ome et plus se delite en uisse et en parler et en touchier que l’ome, mais de corrompre ne puet si toust come l’ome. Mais le corrompre de la fame si dure trop auant qu’il passe, et celi de l’ome maintenat se passe. Et il a autre peril a la fame qu’a l’ome. Maintenant qui’il est corrompu celle volente li est passe come le feu qui art et l’ome le gette de l’aigee desus: maintenant sestaint et se refrede. Mais la fame, qui si souent ne se puet corrompre, si art et si eschaufe plus que li feus qui art el l’on li trait la buche et li art plus. Et por ceste raison la fame a plus chaude volente et plus se delite en se fait que l’ome, car elle art plus en ce fait que l’ome por ce qu’elle ne se puet corrompre si tost ne se souent.”

A reasonably free translation might read something like this:

The king asks: “Who is better able to abstain from lechery, man or woman?” Sydrac replies: “Woman is better able to abstain from this act than man, because man is of hotter complexion than woman and this desire visits man more frequently than woman. And the hottest woman in the world is colder than the coldest man in the world; and for each time that a woman reaches orgasm a man may reach orgasm twenty-seven times. And this can be seen openly, since every time that a man lies with a woman carnally he can hardly fail to reach orgasm; and he can reach orgasm in many other ways—filling [i.e., over-eating?] or seeing can make him ejaculate. A woman cannot reach orgasm so often, and for several times that she lies with a man she is scarcely able to reach orgasm once. But woman is of hotter desire and will in this act than man and delights more in seeing and speaking and touching than man but cannot reach orgasm as quickly as man. But woman’s orgasm lasts a long time before it is finished and man’s passes quickly. And there is other danger for woman [more] than for man. As soon as he has reached orgasm his desire passes, like a fire that is burning and someone throws water on it: it is quickly extinguished and grows cold. But woman, who cannot reach orgasm so often, burns and heats up more than a burning fire that burns more strongly when a log is removed from it. And for this reason woman has hotter desire and takes greater pleasure in this act than man, since she burns more in this act than man because she cannot reach orgasm so quickly or so often.

It will be seen that this is a relatively neutral account, concentrating on the physiological differences between the sexes. Men are of a hotter “complexion” (i.e., physiological constitution) than women; accordingly they are more easily and more frequently aroused. Their desire, however, is soon satisfied and soon abates. Women, because of their colder constitution, take longer to be aroused; conversely their desire is more intense and their pleasure lasts longer.

The equivalent English passages from the Laud and Lansdowne manuscripts are given below, with the Laud version (B) on the left and the Lansdowne version (L) on the right:

*“Wheþer off lecherie may more (260)
Man or woman, and wherfore?”*

“A womman may more of þat play
Thenne ony man fynde may
And I shall telle þe forwhy:
The ha[t]test woman, sekerly,
Is well colder yet of kynde
Thanne the coldest man me may fynde;
And for the grete hete of man,
Hathe he ofte wille to womman 7730
For of hete comeþ þe appetite
And bringeþ hym vnto delite;
And whanne he doth as he hadde mente
And his nature be from hym wente,
His hete slakeþ and goth away
And at þat tyme noo more he may.
Wymmen not so soone ben hote
Whanne þey come vnto þat note:
As man hathe wrought þat he woll doo,
Thanne comeþ theyre delite vnto; 7740
And as of colde is sleckyng hete
With water þat men theron gete,
Soo is þe hete of man anoon
Sleknyd whan he hathe his dede doon.
Womman as soone enchafeþ nougt

*“Wheþer of leccherie may more—(260)
Man or womman, and wherfore?” 8826*

“Womman may more of þat play
þan any man hir fynde may
And I shal telle þe now why:
The hattest womman, sikerly, 8830
Is wel colder 3it of kynde
þan þe coldest man þat men may finde;
And for þe grete hete of man,
Wommen haþ ofte wille to ham
For of þe mannes hete comeþ her appetite
And makeþ wymmen in greet delite;
But whanne he haþ done as he haþ ment
And his kinde be from him went,
His hete slakeþ and goth away
And at þat tyme no more he may. 8840
Wymmen ben not so sone hote
Whanne þei come to þat note:
Whanne he ha wrought þat he wole do,
þanne comeþ delite hir vnto;
And as wiþ colde is slekned hete
Of watir þat men þerto may gete,
So is mannes hete nede
Slakinge whanne he haþ done his dede.
Womman so sone enchaufed is nougt

Whanne a man hathe with her wrought	Whanne a man haþ wiþ hir wrought 8850
Nor her nature passith not as tite,	Nc hir kynde passith not as tite;
Forwhy is lenger hir delite	þefore þe lenger is hir delite
And why is she more of might 7749	And þefore is she of more might
Thanne man, þat slekneþ anoon right.”	þan man, þat slakeþ anoon right.”

(Sidrak 2.516-19)

[7721,23 /8225, 27 *may*: is capable of; L8828 *hir fynde*: provide for her; 7726/8830 *sekerly/sikerly*: certainly; 7727/8831 *of kynde*: by nature; B7728 *me*: one; 7730/8834 *wille*: desire; L8834 *ham*: them; 7733/8837 *ment(e)*: intended; 7734 *nature/8838 kinde*: semen; 7738/8842 *note*: business; 7739 *woll/8843 wole*: wishes to; 7742/8846 *gete*: pour or throw; L8847 *nede*: necessarily; 7745 *enchafe/8849 enchaufed is*: warms up; 7747 *nature/8851 kynde*: sexual fluid. (For a comparison of this treatment with that in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum naturale* see the note on these lines in *Sidrak* 2.802-03. See further Burton, "Sidrak on Reproduction" 296-301; "Drudgery" 27-28.)]

In both English versions the wording of the question appears to reverse the meaning of the French: where the French (as translated above) is concerned with the ability to *abstain from* sexual indulgence, the English is concerned with the ability to *sustain* it. This looks like a simple case of mistranslation, with *souffrir* taken in one of the senses that has survived into the modern period (see Greimas, s.v. *sofrir* v., sense 9, "permettre, tolérer") rather than in its earliest sense (Greimas, sense 1, "s'abstenir"); but I do not know on what grounds one could rule out the possibility either of the translator's having made a conscious decision to alter the sense of the original or of my translation above being wrong. When the original is ambiguous, discrimination between mistranslation and conscious alteration becomes impossible.

In the answer the Laud version stays reasonably close to the spirit of the French. Men are of hotter complexion than women; their heat makes them desire frequent copulation; their heat cools and their desire passes as soon as ejaculation is achieved. In the Lansdowne version, however, this raw material is given a very different slant by what appear at first sight to be only slight changes in wording. Whereas in Laud a woman is capable of greater sexual play than any man can summon up (7723-24), in Lansdowne she is capable of more than any man can provide *for her* (8827-28). In Laud a man's great heat makes him desire a woman frequently: his appetite derives from his heat and gives rise to his pleasure (7729-32); in Lansdowne, on the other hand, man's heat is the source of *woman's* frequent desire, *woman's* appetite, and *woman's* pleasure (8833-36). Thus by a few seemingly innocuous changes the Lansdowne scribe (or his exemplar) turns a fairly neutral account of the differences between male and female physiology into a picture that paints woman as a voracious sexual predator.

The tendency to demonize women in this way is certainly present in the French source, most markedly perhaps in the passage comparing an evil woman to a crocodile that tries to eat the little bird that picks the worms out of its teeth (question 82 in the English versions, *Sidrak* 1.244-49, 2.753-55; discussed in detail in Burton, "The Crocodile"); but this tendency is generally stronger in the English, and stronger again in manuscripts of the Lansdowne type than in those of the Laud type. It looks as if what we are dealing with in this last situation is neither mistranslation nor adaptation by the translator, but changes deliberately wrought by an antifeminist English copyist. Such a situation of conscious scribal alteration (with reference to manuscripts

of *Piers Plowman*) has been neatly characterized by Tim William Machan as involving “a not very authoritative author and some very authorial scribes” (15).

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Abstract

Editors of medieval texts that are translated from other languages face difficulties when the translation differs significantly from the original. Are the

differences unintended, the result of misunderstanding and mistranslation? Or do they proceed from a conscious decision on the translator's part to change the meaning of the original? Is it possible to be sure one knows the difference? This paper discusses three test cases encountered in preparing for the Early English Text Society a critical edition of *Sidrak and Bokkus*, the fifteenth-century English verse translation of the Old French prose book of knowledge, *Le livre de Sidrac*.