

WORLD LITERATURE, CIRCULATION, AND THE MIDDLE AGES

César Domínguez

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Sichuan University

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Al maestro Theo D'haen

One might have anticipated that world literature would occupy a prominent place in the next ACLA report on the state of the discipline, which is due in 2016. In the previous report—the Saussy report—two papers, by David Damrosch and Katie Trumpener, respectively, were devoted to world literature. In Damrosch's words, "World literature has exploded in scope during the past decade. No shift in modern comparative study has been greater than the accelerating attention to literatures beyond masterworks by the great men of the European great powers" ("World Literature" 43). And during the period from 1996 (Damrosch's *terminus post quem*) to 2015, world literature has qualified either as a new paradigm for comparative literature (Thomsen 2) or even as an emerging discipline with a new administrative and disciplinary organization, including professional associations, chairs, undergraduate and graduate training, and textbooks, of which Theo D'haen's is the most recent and systematic. Haun Saussy's essay in the aforementioned report shows a cautious approach to this disciplinary shift by advocating that "comparative literature does not own world literature" but "supplies the instructions, the labor, and the glue" (11). This compromise might translate into the merged field of "comparative world literature" in the same line of a previous rapprochement, the one between comparative literature and cultural studies (Tötösy de Zepetnek), and most probably with identically poor results.

Do premodern and—most specifically—medieval literatures enjoy a better position in the 2016 ACLA report as a result of the broadening of scope attributed to world literature? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Notice that Damrosch refers to a "shift in *modern* comparative study," but not in *premodern* comparative study. Furthermore, in her survey of the place of medieval studies in comparative literature between 2001

and 2005 for the Saussy report, Caroline D. Eckhardt concluded, “ACLA presentations by medievalists may be mostly adventitious, or dependent on the energies and professional networks of particular session-organizers” (143). This situation has not improved at all, as the following figures relative to the presence of medieval seminars in the conferences from 2005 onwards show: 1.5% in 2006, 3.1% in 2007, 1.3% in 2008, 0% in 2009, 0.5% in 2010, 0.6% in 2011, 0.4% in 2012, 0.01% in 2013, 0.004% in 2014, and 0.01% in 2015. This situation is neither exclusive to the ACLA, nor to US academia. Though the MLA has a specific division and a discussion group devoted to “Comparative Studies in Medieval Literature” and has published several books on single medieval works, none of them either includes the terms “comparison” or “comparative” in the title or presents itself as a comparative study in medieval literature. A case in point is the volume *Teaching World Literature*, with just a single contribution devoted to premodern literatures (Newman). The Société Française de Littérature Générale et Comparée has organized thirty-five conferences since its foundation in 1956, of which only three conferences (in 1964, 1977, and 2002) dealt with medieval topics. Of the eighteen conferences organized by the Sociedad Española de Literatura General y Comparada, which was founded in 1977, only two (in 2004 and 2009) included medieval topics. The situation is not more favorable in the International Comparative Literature Association, which has included medieval topics in only one of its conferences so far (in 1988).

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Neither comparative literature nor medievalism should assume the full responsibility for this situation on their own. Both disciplines are products of the nineteenth century, and for both disciplines, “national literature” was—and in some cases still is—a key concept of their agendas. Whereas comparative literature found an institutional place *per contra* premodern literatures and national philologies, medievalism kept national philologies well supplied with ancient texts that supported distinctive national identities. And for reading these texts, comparison was not considered a method *per se*—medievalists are supposed to be able to read original texts in several languages and therefore compare them—in contrast to the scientific methodology of auxiliary disciplines such as paleography, codicology, textual criticism, and so forth.

I concur with Eckhardt when she argues that “academic disciplines are not only institutional and theoretical constructs but also behavioral and performative phenomena” (141). In my opinion, world literature is a key object when it comes to engaging comparative literature and medievalism in a constructive dialogue, that is, in asking new questions and posing problems that do not exist for either comparative literature or medievalism on their own. In this research field at the crossroads of comparative literature and medievalism, the first thing that needs to be carried out, according to Eckhardt, is a comparative history of medieval literatures (148).

A plan for such a comparative history has been approved by the ICLA’s Coordinating Committee in July 2010. The project I have set up, entitled “Crossing Medieval Boundaries: A Comparative History of Literary Contacts and Cultural Routes, 1250-1350,” aims at posing this question: How does cultural circulation

work during the aforementioned period? This question has been asked neither by comparative literature in relation to medieval literatures nor by medievalism out of Christian Western Europe. And yet, circulation is considered a defining feature of world literature. “I take world literature to encompass,” Damrosch says, “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language [...]. In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base” (*What is World Literature?* 4). Interestingly, world history—also an emerging discipline—has been defined in relation to circulation too, as when William H. McNeill says that both civilizations and world systems “can be best understood as part of a far more inclusive spectrum of ‘communication nets,’” wherein attention should be paid to “new means of transport and communication” (xii).

Now, if one concurs with Eckhardt and Damrosch when they argue that presentism should be avoided by both comparative literature and world literature, it follows that

344 “What Do We Mean by ‘Circulation’ in the Middle Ages?” is a pressing question for the research field at the crossroads of comparative literature and medievalism. Were circulation not historicized when applied to medieval literatures, current definitions of world literature would be at best retrospective illusions once again projected on medieval literatures. One should not overlook that Western European medieval literatures are both theories and practices of circulation, not to mention that the Middle Ages have been characterized as a period of extreme mobility. “The carbon footprint of Philippe de Mézières,” as David Wallace provocatively puts it, “would embarrass even Prince Charles and the current house of Windsor” (87). Here I can only address two key issues related to circulation, namely, what I call “(pseudo-)autoethnographic texts” and the worlding of a medieval theory and practice of circulation, *translatio*. The paper will end with some general remarks on how a world approach to medieval literatures at the crossroads of comparative literature and medievalism does not aim at providing a complete picture of the literary cultures of the Middle Ages, but rather a set of problems of medieval literatures with a worldwide dimension.

I. NEWS FROM OTHER WORLDS: (PSEUDO-) AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC TEXTS

When the Flemish Franciscan William of Rubruck set foot on Tartars’ lands on June 3, 1253, he experienced a chronotopical syndrome: “Postquam ergo recessimus de Soldaia, tertia die invenimus Tartaros, inter quos cum intravi, visum fuit michi recte quod ingrederer quoddam aliud seculum” (Wyngaert 171; chp. 1.14).¹ Significantly, the chronotope imbedded in *seculum* is the very one that supports the formula of *translatio*. But *translatio* was traumatically experienced by William inasmuch as he was moving in the opposite direction, that is, from West to East (from South to North in medieval terms) in a geographical sense but also—and most importantly—in an

auctoritas-related sense. William, himself a writer of a travel account for King Louis IX and all of Christian Western Europe, was a reader of an oriental(ist) encyclopedia of the East compiled by the *auctores* during centuries which he had to measure with the *partes orientales* he was encountering.

The climax of the report is precisely when William is asked by the Great Khan to take part in a disputation about *translatio*. I will deal with this issue later. What I want to stress now is that medieval travel accounts such as William's were widely read as vast repositories of ethnographic data whose authority was acknowledged by finding their way into several encyclopedic genres such as *summae* and *specula*. Vincent of Beauvais, for instance, made an extensive use of John of Plano Carpini's *Ystoria mongalorum*, and excerpts from William's account were included in Roger Bacon's *Opus maius*. But, what about (pseudo-)autoethnographic texts? By using the prefix "pseudo-" I do not intend to make any judgement about the factuality or the fictionality of the events reported. On the contrary, what is of interest to me is the actual need of a/n (pseudo-)autoethnography from other worlds wherein the prefix **345** only seems to be relevant for the modern reader.

I am drawing here from the influential book by Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*. Pratt counters "ethnographic texts," that is, texts by which "Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others," with "autoethnographic texts," which she defines as those "the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" (7). For Pratt, both ethnographic and autoethnographic texts are products of the "contact zone, [...] the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations" (6). For my part, I define "(pseudo-)autoethnographic texts" as those texts that Europeans themselves write to represent their others as if their others had written them. This apparent contradiction is solved by forgetting the enunciative mimicry.

Pratt's illustrative example of autoethnography is Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*. This 1613 letter addressed to King Philip III of Spain aims at nothing else than providing a "new view of the world [...] by rewriting the history of Christendom to include the indigenous peoples of America" (Pratt 2). Its central problems are, therefore, genealogy and *translatio*. My example of (pseudo-)autoethnography is, of course, Prester John's *Epistola*, whose Latin "original" was addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus c. 1165. The secondary literature on Prester John's letter is extensive, and the hypotheses about its authorship many. All these hypotheses concur, however, that the author was a Western European. In its own way, this medieval letter is a revisionist account of the world too, wherein genealogy and *translatio* are key problems as well.

Interestingly, not only eyewitness travelogues, such as those by John of Plano Carpini and Marco Polo, but also Prester John's letter found its way into encyclopedic genres, which bears witness to the *auctoritas* it deserved. Scholarship has related this *auctoritas*-value to the authenticity medieval audiences attributed to the letter

and included it into the variegated category of texts that provide information about Eastern *mirabilia*. Rarely, however, has one wondered why one would forge such a letter. When this question has been asked, two main answers have been given. For some scholars, the aim of the letter was to satisfy Europeans' yearning for Oriental richness. For other scholars, the letter was a strategic move to strengthen the crusading zeal in Outremer with the hope of an alliance with the Christian army of Prester John. Although both answers may be true to a certain extent, I consider that the key issue is neither the content (as in the former answer), for the letter did not provide new information, nor its potential military effects (as in the latter answer), for the first news about Prester John and the Latin letter date well before the important defeats in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. In my opinion, the enunciative mimicry on which the letter is built is an attempt to control an increasing number of others in an expanding world.

346 Let me come back to Pratt's analysis. Her research on transculturation as a product of the contact zone traces back to the mid-eighteenth century, when "a shift in what can be called European 'planetary consciousness'" took place in coincidence with the "inauguration of a new territorial phase of capitalism" (Pratt 9), that is, the Industrial Revolution. I was amazed by the fact that the expanding circulation of Prester John's *Epistola* in the vernaculars took place from the mid-thirteenth century onwards (Gosman 34), precisely the moment when Western Europe was undergoing what economists have described as a "Commercial Revolution" (López) linked to a "Transport Revolution" (Contamine et al. 217-18). For Robert S. López, in terms of market, "[t]he Commercial Revolution did to the medieval city what the Industrial Revolution was to do to the entire European scene" (87), whereas in terms of the distribution of center and periphery, "the difference between Italy north of the Tiber and the most retarded parts of Europe during the Commercial Revolution was as significant as that between England or the United States and India or China during the Industrial Revolution" (93).

From 1250 to 1350, the commercial cities in Northern Italy exploited the routes that reached the borders of the known world, from England to the Pontus and from the Maghreb to China. The Italian monopoly in the Mediterranean exported to the East manufactured goods whereby the foundations of a colonial trade were laid. Did this commercial revolution bring about a new medieval "planetary consciousness" against which both Prester John's letter and missionaries and merchants' travel accounts should be read anew? Scholarship has concentrated on how these texts contributed to the literary topos of *mirabilia*. Has it not come time to read literature from the mid-thirteenth century to the mid-fourteenth century through the lens of the commercial revolution, as we read literature from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century through the lens of the Industrial Revolution?

Once again, an important caveat is the danger of retrospective illusionary projections. Whereas Pratt's contact zones are spaces wherein "peoples geographically and historically separated" establish "ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of

coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6), the contact zones of the commercial revolution are neither spatio-temporally constant nor places of radically unequal encounters between Europe and its subjugated others. This may explain both the mobility of Prester John’s kingdom, which was transferred from the Indies to Africa—once the Eurasian trade network was set up—in accordance with “[t]he failure of Europeans to penetrate Africa during the Middle Ages” (Bovill 108), and the chronotopical syndrome experienced by those who traveled in the opposite direction of *translatio*.

I cannot analyze here in a detailed way what I have termed as “chronotopical syndrome,” but only touch on briefly two examples. “By the end of the thirteenth century,” David Louis Gassman argues, “virtually all the elements associated with the concept of *translatio studii* had been developed [...] and the theory [...] assumed an established place in European thinking” (733). If *translatio* was a theory of world leadership (*imperium*) and scholarship (*scientia*) whereby political legitimacy and wisdom from the Holy Land followed the path of the sun westward to Christian Europe, what other effect but a “chronotopical syndrome” could have produced any news that challenged this picture of the world?

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All the European kingdoms tried to fit within the pattern of *translatio*, even those from the far-off periphery, as proved by Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*. How was then possible the existence of a king in the far East who claimed to wear—as the Occitan version of Prester John’s letter puts it—“la plus auta e plus nobla corona e de mayor poder, e mayor terre e plus honrada que en tot lo mon sia” (“the best, noblest, and biggest realm in the world,” my trans.; Gosman 505; MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ancien fonds français, 6115, fol. 2^r)? An Eastern *rex et sacerdos* who addresses his letter nothing less than to the chief representatives of Western *translatio imperii* to show their inferiority: “jo, Prestre Johan nomez, / Sur tuz autres sui sire clamez, / Des ricesces ke suz ciel sunt / Ai plus ke autre seit el monde” (“I, named Prester John, Lord of Lords, surpass all other under heaven in riches,” my trans.; Gosman 123-24; MS Dublin, Christ Church Cathedral, fol. 182^r, vv. 125-28). Why mimic the voice of an Eastern king who challenges the theory of *translatio* if not to present the problems that a new planetary consciousness was posing?

On May 24, 1254, the Great Khan Mangu promoted a theological debate between Christians, Saracens, and Buddhists, which anticipates the debates Franciscans would have with Aztecs and Buddhists during the sixteenth century. Interestingly, William of Rubruck does not inform us of the result of the debate, but he does tell us how he explained the Christian Western Europe’s theory of *translatio* to the Khan: “Ex hiis verbis Deis dico ipsi Mangu quia Deus dedit ei multa. Potestatem enim et divitias quas habet non dederunt ei ydola tuinorum, sed Deus omnipotens qui fecit celum et terram, in manu cuius sunt omnia regna, et transfert ea de natione in nationem propter peccata hominum” (Wyngaert 291; ch. 33.5).² But this time, the proud reply is not voiced by a fictional Eastern king, as in the case of Prester John. In his letter to King Louis IX, Mangu let him know that “In celo non est nisi unus Deus

eternus, super terram non sit nisi unus dominus Chingischan, filli Dei” (Wyngaert 307; ch. 36.6)³ to whom the French king himself should owe obedience.

The creation of Eurasia as one commercial zone—enhanced by the Pax Mongolica—brought about a new planetary consciousness that challenged Christian Western Europe’s philosophy of knowledge. In contrast to the contact zone analyzed by Pratt, in this medieval contact zone, Europe is not the core, but the periphery of the world’s first land superpower, the Mongol Empire (Beckwith 183).

II. THE WORLDING OF *TRANSLATIO*: KNOWLEDGE FROM OTHER WORLDS

348 How did the new planetary consciousness resulting from the contact zone we are analyzing here affect the corpus we read as medieval literature? One may initially say that it did not affect it that much according to the data we have. The problem, however, may have nothing to do with the data, but with the perspective from which we read them. Whether medievalist or comparatist, any scholar would be extremely happy to find references to literary works from other cultures in medieval travel writing. As far as I know, none of the Christian Western European travel accounts includes such information. The same may be said of European medieval literature in Eastern travel accounts—as the one by two Nestorian Chinese monks, Bar Sawma of Khan Balik and Markos of Kawshang, in the late thirteenth century—although no hasty conclusions should be drawn due to the lack of comparative studies.

One may, of course, attribute the absence of references to literary works to the very professions of the travelers to the East, mainly missionaries and merchants. And yet, these two professions were the best suited to have access to literature, for the former had extensive training in several languages, writing and reading, and the latter were constituting the emerging readership of prose fiction. Marco Polo himself co-wrote his account with Rustichello da Pisa, a writer of Arthurian romances such as the *Palamedes*, named for King Arthur’s only Saracen knight. The picture may change, however, if we approach this problem from the perspective of literacy. “The official support of distinctive organized world religions spread literacy,” Christopher I. Beckwith argues, “and developed distinctive literature-based cultures that further redefined the imperial states, leading to the establishment of most of the ethnolinguistic regions of the premodern Old World” (155). For Beckwith, there is a total of nineteen literate areas from Ireland to Japan during the period that concerns us here, out of which the mid-fourteenth-century travel account by John Mandeville in its many variants provides us with nine alphabets, namely, Greek, Coptic, Hebrew, Saracen, Persian-Chaldean, Tartar-Russ, and Cathayan. The inclusion of these alphabets has been traditionally read as a form of truth-claim, not to mention those scholars who have stressed the inaccuracy or even complete invention of some of the alphabets. On the contrary, Malcolm Letts credits Mandeville with a desire to “be

of use to travellers” and to “increase the atmosphere of wonder and mystery which surrounds the whole book” (152). I concur with Letts inasmuch as the large medieval audience Mandeville’s book captivated reveals that medieval readers were not interested in the same things some modern readers are. I would even say that “the atmosphere of wonder” should be attributed to the 1250-1350 expanding world with distinctive literature-based cultures.

For Beckwith, the dissemination of these literary cultures through copy and translation “established the basis [...] for premodern Eurasian civilization as a whole” (156). Let us take the case of King Alfonso the Learned and his patronizing of the translation of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* into Castilian. Whereas from a world literature perspective, the Indian original would automatically qualify as a world literary work, for it circulated widely—both spatially and temporally—“beyond their culture of origin” (Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* 4); for a national medievalism, the Castilian translation is celebrated for being the first tale-collection of “Spanish literature.” However, when contemplated at the crossroads of comparative literature and medievalism, I consider that the Castilian translation poses different problems, which have a worldwide dimension.

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The Castilian translation commissioned by King Alfonso around the mid-thirteenth century was made from an Arabic version belonging to the textual family of Ibn al-Muqaffa’s translation, which was in its turn made from the Middle Persian translation. The Castilian version should be analyzed, therefore, within the Alphonsine, comprehensive translation program from Hebrew and Arabic, which mostly includes scientific works. According to the data provided by Laura Fernández Fernández, around twenty-seven works were translated from the Arabic on orders of Alfonso, out of which twenty are related to astrology, two to mineralogy, and five to wisdom literature, including *El Libro de los buenos proverbios*, *Poridat de las poridades*, *Bocados de oro*, *Historia de la doncella Teodor*, and *Calila e Dimna*.

As in the case of *Calila e Dimna* in particular, the remaining wisdom, literary, and scientific works have also been celebrated by either their circulation or their role within Spanish literature and, hence, its contribution to European literature. Anthony Pym, however, has called attention to which target languages the Hebrew and Arabic scientific works were translated into by Alfonso, which are, on the one hand, Castilian and, on the other hand, French and Latin. The use of Castilian as a written target language is related to a nation-building policy, whereas the use of French and Latin as written target languages is related to his candidature as emperor of the Germanic Empire (455). Were we to see Alfonso’s wisdom literature from this translational policy perspective, we will realize that the same distinction applies. *Calila e Dimna* and the other four wisdom works were translated from Arabic into Castilian in the mid-thirteenth century, but from 1263 to 1275 (the period of his imperial negotiations) the target language changes into French (*Livre deleschiele Mahomet*).

Besides the shift in target languages, what really matters here is the question Pym

poses regarding the selection of the target language for scientific works: “What substantial mid-thirteenth-century public would have actually needed translations of Arabic science into Castilian rather than Latin?” (456). I am of the opinion that this very same question should be asked in relation to wisdom literature. And the answer is that, in accordance with “Alfonso’s motivation [...] to lure scientific production and consumption away from Latin” (Pym 456), the King also wanted to lure wisdom literature away from Latin, which involved challenging the Church.

By translating the Arabic *Kalīla wa-Dimna* into Castilian, Alfonso was not only introducing a new genre into the emerging Castilian prose fiction in search of a future audience, but mainly asserting his central role in the promotion of civic ethical models which the Church could not take into consideration. Interestingly, of the two fifteenth-century manuscripts that contain Alfonso’s translation, the one closest to the original (MS Esc. X-iii-4) includes the preface by Ibn al-Muqaffa’, wherein it is stressed that “[l]os filósofos entendidos de qualquier ley et de qualquier lengua siempre punaron et se trabajaron de buscar el saber, et de representar et hordenar la filosofía” (“philosophers of any region or language always strove for gaining knowledge and providing an adequate depiction of philosophy,” my trans.; Cacho Blecua and Lacarra 89). As a result of the act of sponsoring this translation, Alfonso mirrors several characters and people at the same time: the philosopher Berzebuey, who travels from Persia to India in search of a knowledge he encapsulates in “este libro [*Calila e Dimna*]” (“in this book,” my trans.; 12) he himself has translated; the King Sirechuel (modeled upon the Persian King Chosroes I), who gains knowledge by both reading the book translated by Berzebuey, to the point that in the King “es acabado el saber” (“knowledge is best embodied,” my trans.; 354), and disseminating wisdom among his people, whom he orders that “tomasen aquellos escritos, et que los leyesen” (“take those books and read them,” my trans.; 102); and the future Castilian audience his translation program is constructing, who should “guiar[se] por sus antecesores, que son los filósofos et los sabios” (“follow their predecessors, who are philosophers and learned men,” my trans.; 91). Once again, *translatio* is experienced in an opposite direction. Alfonso “traveled” to India in search of wisdom and, like King Chosroes, who founded the learning center of Gundeshapur, where Greek, Indian, Persian, and Aramaic sciences were combined, he built a court of erudition by combining Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin traditions. In contrast to the model of *translatio studii* advocated by the Leonese bishops, Alfonso turned to an alternative model of *translatio* wherein “[l]os filósofos entendidos de *qualquier ley* et de *qualquier lengua*” (89; emphasis added) may provide wisdom in an expanding world. The fact that the MS X-iii-4 includes after the *Calila* a 1223-translation into Castilian of Isidore of Seville’s *Mappa mundi* is therefore most telling.

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Bonaventura of Siena, Alfonso's notary, translated the Spanish version of *Kitab al-Miraj*, made by Abraham, into French (*Livre deleschiele Mahomet*) in 1264, that is, during the period of the King's imperial negotiations as mentioned above. That is why Bonaventura refers to the King in the preface to his translation as "Rois des Romeins" ("King of the Romans," my trans.; Muñoz Sendino 251). It was precisely during this period when Brunetto Latini stayed at Alfonso's court. Brunetto, whom Dante called his *maestro*, might very well have taken with him a copy of the French translation back to Florence. This has led to the hypothesis about the influence of the *Livre deleschiele Mahomet* upon the *Commedia*'s structure—as argued by Miguel Asín Palacios—and to bitter disputes between *Dantisti*.

There seems to be a fundamental contradiction in that the *Commedia* is acknowledged as a world masterpiece provided it had not been influenced by an Arabic book such as the *Kitab al-Miraj*, a fifth-century treatise that concerned nothing less than to the *translatio studii*: how Muhammad received wisdom from God. The *Kitab al-Miraj* would even qualify in itself as a world literary work according to its circulation. I cannot deal with this issue here. But let me come back to Dante and, most specifically, to *Inferno* 1.105: "e sua nazione sarà tra feltro e feltro" (16).⁴ *Dantisti* have long discussed the meaning of *feltro*, and most of them have rejected one of the explanations provided by Boccaccio in his 1373 lecture:

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Alcuni altri accostandosi in ogni cosa alla predetta opinione, dando del *tra feltro e feltro* una esposizione assai pellegrina, dicendo sè estimare la dimostrazione di questa mutazione, cioè del permutarsi i costumi degli uomini, e gli appetiti da avarizia in liberalità, doversi cominciare in Tartaria, ovvero nello imperio di mezzo, laddove estimano essere adunate le maggiori ricchezze e moltitudini di tesori. (115)⁵

It is not my intention to participate in the debate over the meaning of *feltro*. What is of interest to me is a phrase within this passage that scholars seem to have overlooked, namely, *imperio di mezzo*. It may seem a direct translation of 中国 (*Zhōngguó*, 'Middle Kingdom'), a term that first appeared in the *Classic of History* (sixth century BC), and was later used by those states that saw themselves as the sole legitimate successor to previous dynasties. Boccaccio's phrase, however, should not be confused with the historic title of the Chinese empire, for it had already been abolished before the Mongol conquest (Olschki 191, n. 40). *Imperio di mezzo*, or *imperium medium*, refers here to the territory of the Chaghatai Khanate ("in Tartaria"), for it included Central Asia (Ryan 350). In any case, although Boccaccio himself attributes this explanation to those travelers who witnessed the Great Khan's richness (116)—including a reference to the *translatio* whereby "la scienza, la religione e l'armi [...] paiono andate in ver ponente" (113)⁶—modern scholars have questioned his acquaintance with them. Donald F. Lach, for instance, argues that Boccaccio, "[l]ike Dante, [...] was more indebted to the learned tradition than to the travelers, merchants, and

missionaries of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Latin translation of the *Panchatantra* probably furnished him with the germ of his plot in story 2 of Day 2 in the *Decameron*" (76).

In my opinion, the disparate information between the learned tradition and the travelers' literature is another example of the chronotopical syndrome experienced by Christian Western Europe as a result of an expanding world. The same happens in the visual arts, as when the idealized and westernized portraits of the Great Khan (Fig. 1) exist side by side with others that seem to depend on (indirect) observation as, for instance, the Mongol khan by Cibo, the master of the Cocharelli codex (c. 1330; Fig. 2). What is undeniable, therefore, is that the representation of the other, from the fabulous first ones, like the Eastern semi-human beings in the tympanum of La Madeleine de Vézelay (c. 1130; Figs. 3 & 4), became more and more realistic, from the portrait of the Chinese character of the Parement de Narbonne (1373-78; Figs. 5 & 6) to the fifteenth-century Mongol archer by Pisanello (Fig. 7). As far as literary genres are concerned, an example of such disparate information may be drawn from those thirteenth-century Western European scholars who attributed the invention of the literary genre of fables to Aesop and its *translatio* to Europe to Romulus, as Vincent of Beauvais argued in the *Speculum historiale* 4.2, whereas the genre was being re-introduced into Europe by translating Arabic sources. All these disparities have traditionally been explained in terms of a spatio-temporal deficiency. "During the Middle Ages," to quote Erich Auerbach's famous argument, "all practical acquaintance with alien forms of life and culture was lost. Although the past cultures—the antique and the Judeo-Christian—were of great importance within the frame of medieval civilization, [...] there was yet such a lack of historical consciousness and perspective that the events and characters of those distant epochs were simply transferred to the present forms and conditions of life" (320-21). A sole reading in terms of lack may change completely were this issue confronted at the crossroads of medievalism and comparative literature with a worldwide dimension, for what Auerbach is overlooking here is that *translatio* is precisely the form of medieval historical consciousness that was seriously challenged during 1250-1350 as a result of the encounter with an expanding world.

NOTES

1. "Now on the third day after we left Soldaia, we encountered the Tartars; and when I came among them I really felt as if I were entering some other world" (Jackson 70-71).
2. "These words of God I address to Mangu, since God has given him much. The power and the wealth he possesses have not given him by the idols of the *tuins* but by Almighty God, Who made Heaven and Earth and in Whose hand are all kingdoms, kingdoms which for men's sins He passes from one nation to another" (Jackson 228).
3. "In Heaven there is only one eternal God; on earth there is only one lord, Chingis Chan. This is the word of the son of God" (Jackson 248).

4. “He will be born between Feltro and Feltro” (Dante 70).
5. “Still others, adhering in every other respect to the aforementioned opinion, give a rather strange interpretation of ‘between felt and felt,’ saying they believe that the proof of this transformation (the changes in men’s customs and appetites from avarice to generosity) must begin among the Tartars, or the Middle Empire, where, they believe, there were amassed the greatest quantities of treasure” (Papio 107-08).
6. “religion and science had come into being and had already begun to spread, moving thence to Egypt, and from Egypt to Greece” (Papio 106).

APPENDIX



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Figure 1: Marco Polo and the Great Khan (MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, 264, fol. 220^r). Courtesy of Getty Images.

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Figure 2: Mongol Khan (*Tractatus de septem vitiis*; MS London, British Library, Add. 27695, fol. 14^r). Public domain.



Figure 3: Tympanum of La Madeleine de Vézelay (c. 1130). Public domain.

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Figure 4: Detail. Dog-headed beings.

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Figure 5: Parement de Narbonne (1373-78). Musée du Louvre (MI 1121). Public domain.



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Figure 6: Detail. Chinese character.



Figure 7: Antonio Pisanello, *Mongol archer* (c. 1425). *Codex Vallardi*. Musée du Louvre (N° 2325). Public domain.

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