

On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy: The Thirteenth-Century Paris Textbook Edition. Edition, Introduction, Translation, and Notes, by L. Michael Harrington. Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 12. Pp. ix+296. Paris/Leuven/Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2011. (paper). 978-90-429-2481-9
Reviewed for *Speculum* by Wayne J. Hankey (Dalhousie University and King's College)

"[I]n the case of Dionysius, the original text was not fluid and clear—not because Dionysius was a poor student of Greek, or unconcerned with style altogether, but because he seems to have regarded familiarity as dangerous for his text. And so he attempted to conceal his subject matter from the uninitiated, and to reveal it to his initiates in the only way it could be revealed, through an elevation of the mind. Eriugena's translations were also not fluid or clear—they were 'bad' translations in that sense—but they were faithful to the original text, thus continuing its project of defamiliarization....[I]t was the continuing strangeness of Eriugena's own work that made it, even in its textbook form, the standard for such authors as Albert the Great in the thirteenth century and Denys the Carthusian in the fourteenth, both of whom remarked that they used his translation precisely because it preserved the idioms of the original Greek." (*On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, pp. 9–10)

Michael Harrington's perceptive description of the common strategy of Dionysius and Eriugena, and of what attracted Albert and Denys, defamiliarization in order to direct our understanding to the nature of the reality being treated, and idiomatic strangeness as a sign of authenticity, is not only useful in respect to Dionysius and Eriugena and the futures of their texts, but also in respect to Harrington's own project in this volume and its predecessor in the same series: *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris. The Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite in Eriugena's Latin Translation with the Scholia translated by Anastasius the Librarian and Excerpts from Eriugena's Periphyseon* (Peeters, 2004).

Proceeding from what is indeed "no secret", "that the format of a book can suggest how it ought to be read" (*ibid.*, p. 1), Harrington's aim is to reproduce as closely as possible the format of Eriugena's translation of Dionysius' *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* as a thirteenth-century student would have encountered it. Eriugena's translation of Dionysius, and Anastasius the Papal Librarian's translation of the scholia, form the core; the latter, formerly in the margins, alternated in the thirteenth century with short sections of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in the columns. Between the lines of the text are four

centuries of alternate readings and corrections to Eriugena's translation (some very likely made by Eriugena himself). And then, for the *crème-de-la-crème*, there were large chunks of the (highly suspect) *Periphyseon* placed as if they were scholia to the translation. This last subversively (whether intentionally or not) transmitted the doctrine of the *Periphyseon* without identifying it as such. In contrast to moderns reading moderns, the thirteenth-century reader did not start with an historically located text revealing the thought of its equally identified author with the option of adding perspectives from known commentators. Instead, there was a series of voices, most unidentified, directed to understanding a text intentionally defamiliarized, translated by someone who appreciated and preserved the author's strategy.

Harrington's format is the right one for this text. Right, not only because it enables a more authentic encounter with the thirteenth-century reader's mode of understanding, but also because our situation in respect to Dionysius and Eriugena is not very different from his. Harrington's format is also suggestively right for us. We do not suppose that Dionysius was a contemporary of St Paul, and we can identify the sources he used better than his thirteenth-century readers could, beyond these, however, his (or her) identity, intentions, and doctrines are little better known. I use "little" intentionally, because Harrington carefully and thoroughly identifies corruptions of the thirteenth-century Dionysian corpus as conveyed in Eriugena's translation. Some corruptions resulted in the reversal of the meaning of passages at important points, and some of these errors started with Eriugena. He had only a single faulty Greek manuscript. Indeed, given this, what constantly astonishes is how deeply, in the end, Eriugena understood Dionysius. This is because, as Harrington asserts, Eriugena's "translation, like all translations, is also a commentary" (*ibid.*, p. 23), a commentary by the most profoundly philosophical Christian mind since Origen's, one incorporated into Origen's tradition.

Eriugena's translations are determinedly literal. What, however, made them enduringly useful, and irreplaceable as an interpretation, even when, both in the Middle Ages and at present, there were better Greek texts and more easily intelligible translations, was that Eriugena entered the Dionysian mentality. Despite the problems at very important points, the fundamental teaching got through, in some instances, after much time and error. Besides Eriugena's philosophical genius, this was due, in part, to his use, outside the translations, of paraphrase, constant endeavours to restate what the texts said. In the end, Eriugena was a successful translator of Dionysius because of their common

Neoplatonism, with both its deep religious sympathy and its demand for complete philosophical analysis and exposition.

Harrington is less severe on the translator-commentator's betrayal in this volume than he was in his treatment of Eriugena's version of the *Mystical Theology*. There Harrington portrayed it as eliminating "important distinctions between thought and union in Dionysius' text." The "filing down" of the radical distinction, begun in the first Greek commentators on Dionysius, and continued by Eriugena, "found its most developed expression" in the Dionysian commentaries of Albert the Great and Aquinas (*A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology*, p. 16). After a very exacting analysis of how Eriugena translates the various words and statements treating beauty and likeness, in *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Harrington judges that "if Eriugena is attempting to break down the distinction between the beautiful and the intelligible, as he seems elsewhere to break down the distinction between the good and the intelligible, he is not doing a consistent job of it." (*On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, p. 18). The essential Neoplatonic differences are not erased, "the resulting text does not yield an 'intellectualized' Dionysius." (*ibid.*, p. 23)

If Eriugena, both because, by his literalism, he conveyed Dionysius' defamiliarizing strategy, and because he maintained at least some of the essential Neoplatonic distinctions, was faithful to Dionysius, Harrington as translator only goes part way with him. Certainly returning us to the thirteenth-century format helps defamiliarize the text for us. As an endeavour to get us to rethink the text afresh, by reproducing "the strangeness and occasional awkwardness of Eriugena's version" (*A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology*, p. 37), Harrington's translations continue a constantly surprising literalism. Thus, *super* is translated as "over," "supra nos" is "over our heads", and he follows Eriugena's reproduction of transliterated Greek words. Otherwise, however, the translations are free and often amount to paraphrase.

Michael Harrington reads texts closely and perceptively. He brings a thorough knowledge of the history of philosophy and theology, ancient, medieval and contemporary, of liturgy, iconography, and architecture to his reading. Above all he considers everything philosophically. He rethinks everything, words, ideas, format, again at their roots to find again what truth they hold and convey, and what is being modified, transformed, even betrayed. This volume is a great gift to philosophically, theologically, and historically serious students from him, from Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations, and

from Peeters whose work in setting out the translation in this format exactly must have taken enormous pains.