

Review: *Fixers: Agency, Translation, and the Early Global History of Literature*, by Zrinka Stahuljak

Zrinka Stahuljak, *Fixers: Agency, Translation, and the Early Global History of Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 358pp. \$35.00. ISBN: 9780226830407.

Margaret Kim *

In *Fixers: Agency, Translation, and the Early Global History of Literature*, Zrinka Stahuljak engages with the Global Middle Ages: a conception of medieval studies that draws our attention beyond the traditional borders of Latin Europe. That is, her arguments build from micro level analyses of medieval European experiences of encounter into the history of textual production from the middle of the thirteenth to the end of the fifteenth century. As the title of her book suggests, at the heart of the historical experiences for Europeans is the fixer, a figure of agency that enables and organizes communication and exchange under circumstances marked by contingency and improvisation. Fixers' *raison d'être* is linguistic, but they do not just serve as language interpreters. They operate in all practical situations of contact between humans from different linguistic and cultural communities, always engaging difference to enable the transmission and exchange of ideas and values. They practice commensuration, coming up with comparable measures of something in another language or order rather than finding strict categorical and technical equivalences between two languages. Taking issue with Walter Benjamin's theorization of translation as a transcendental practice based on pure linguistic value beyond the dynamic and material circumstances of interpretation in the real world (14-15), Stahuljak stresses that the fixer's work is a "ternary process" (32) rather than one based on the binary opposition between self and other. Fixers, Stahuljak argues, are key to understanding the literature and cultural history of the Middle Ages, where translation was the mainstay of writing and European encounters took place as a series of transmission, exchange, and transformation across borders.

* Margaret Kim, Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan (kim@mx.nthu.edu.tw).

The book's central and most brilliant idea is to conceive translation not in the narrow modern sense of the faithful and accurate expression of the original in another language but in the dynamic and historical sense of moving across boundaries, communicating and engaging with difference, and effecting transformation in the world at large. Beyond the asymmetrical binary relation between self and other, translation fundamentally grounds the conceptualization and construction of identity, community, and writing in comparison and pluralistic relationality. The argumentation of *Fixers* begins with an historicized conceptualization of fixers that develops through readings of medieval European writing. Throughout this book Stahuljak demonstrates that "fixer" material, from humans who served in various intermediary capacities to the production and proliferation of writing and discourse, is key to understanding medieval European literary history, not as a singular tradition, but as a process of transmission and transformation.

Part 1 of the book, consisting of chapters one and two, focuses on the way fixers historically served as the interface between the language communities of Europeans and non-Europeans. Stahuljak introduces the concept of the fixer, an historical figure of agency, as key to understanding the way translation worked in the Middle Ages. Chapter 1 focuses on the way learning and knowing a wide range of languages, from Hebrew and Arabic to languages of the Mongol empire, were intimately bound up with European undertakings to communicate with and convert the other. Chapter 2 continues this investigation of the intimate connection between encounter and language by demonstrating that commensurability and reciprocal relationality informed the European engagement with the other. Missionary and crusades treatises, merchant guides, and travelers' accounts of the Mongol empire, as well as works of romance did not just project European identity onto the other, but they also translated it into the other. As Stahuljak notes at the end of Chapter 1, the crucial difference between modern empires and medieval European undertakings to convert and colonize local peoples lies in language. The former, dispensing with the fixer, takes possession fully in the language of the colonizer. The latter, relying on the fixer, translates itself into the language of the other and, to a certain extent, acknowledges and assimilates the other.

From the treatment of material history of fixers (notably in the cases of the crusades and missionary undertakings) of Part 1, this book moves onto a conceptual analysis of “fixer” literature in the Middle Ages in Part 2. Chapters 3 through 5, the second part of the book, are meant to be read together as a whole that investigates writing and its engagement with the world at large. Here three great medieval authors—Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, and Philippe de Mézières—figure prominently, as Stahuljak reads their works as fixer literature based on the commensuration of forms and genres and inextricably bound up with situational events and actions. The medieval Burgundian state as the epitome of the fixer entity expanding and developing through translation is a powerful figure of inspiration for Stahuljak’s conceptual treatment of translation in Part 2. Stahuljak treats translation as an idea of literary prestige as well as the basis of literary production in the context of the Burgundians and their politics of governance and state formation. Chapter 3 conceptualizes medieval authorship, as embodied in the works of Machaut, Froissart, and Mézières, as the expression of interface and agency in contemporary historical situations rather than the projection of individual authorial vision independent of external forces. Writing, for these medieval writers, was a way of actively engaging with the princely politics and power dynamic of their time. Serving as the middle agents between rulers and society at large, these writers were fixers. Chapter 4 examines translation and pseudotranslation literature in the context of the Burgundians’ state formation. It suggests that the project of literary translation was pivotal to the Burgundians’ success as an empire. Chapter 5 continues the study of the Burgundians’ promotion of translation and building of libraries (collections, not architecture, that is) to articulate what this means for the literary history of the Middle Ages. Instead of august literary traditions of European nations, Stahuljak’s study of Burgundian collections shows that the great European libraries of noble houses were collaborative enterprises between patrons and makers of texts in different capacities. Instead of grouping texts by genealogy or established authoritative convention, texts were “clusters” (223-24), connected by specific historical situations and collectively projecting a policy or staking a rhetorical position. Throughout this book Stahuljak’s knowledge of the written material is superb, and she has an impressive command of the scholarship on the subject matters she engages with. Particularly in Part 2, her treatment of literary collections of European

languages built around the medieval Burgundian state is, in itself, a formidable achievement. Her writing in Part 2 alone represents a major contribution to the history of the book in the Middle Ages.

I find her argument about the Burgundians brave and spectacular. Some scholars may view this as a controversial thesis, although recent scholarship increasingly valorizes the role of Burgundy in the early European history of state formation because of its capacity for plurality and combinatory arrangements. Instead of conceiving the Burgundian state as a failed dynastic power caught between greater forces in the Middle Ages, Stahuljak characterizes it as a “fixer” state whose imperial expansion functioned on a process of continued translation and transmission. Just as translation flourished as a literary enterprise under the Burgundians, the state also transformed itself into the Valois-Habsburg Empire in a matter of centuries through persistent translation. Burgundian rule was based on the continued process of engagement with and translation into the other, rather than on the projection of national identity against the other.

The conclusion of this book opposes the making of the medieval empire, as illustrated in the case of the Burgundians, to the modern nation-state. By doing so, Stahuljak rewrites medieval literary history beyond the terms of national identity. The particular examples Stahuljak examines here are fixers who engaged in the making of texts in various related capacities, from printing and translation to commerce and collaboration with patrons and artists. While the national literary history of England celebrates William Caxton as an author, Colard Mansion is not treated as such in any counterpart national narrative, even though he also played a significant role as a fixer in the making of European literature and culture of his time. For Stahuljak, the historical reality of fixers is a corrective to the binary relation of identity versus the other that underpins the celebration of the author in the age of the modern nation-state. Fixers constitute an alternative model of active engagement in the world beyond the discourse of the nation-state. To be in-between, an agent in the making of relationality and transmission in the world, was key to engaging with and effecting change in the world at large in the Middle Ages, and it can still be a model of meaningful engagement and action for the future.

Challenging the binary opposition between self and other as the dominant form of relationality in the world, *Fixers* proposes a way forward beyond Eurocentrism. It focuses on the creative and transformative agency of intermediaries and emphasizes process and dynamic instead of domination and containment. Behind such an accomplished book is also Stahuljak's personal commitment to the work of fixers in the real world. She herself has been a war reporter, a "fixer," and her lectures in French (published as *Les Fixeurs* [Paris, 2021]) make clear the presentism of fixers in the world. I should clarify that the French work is in crucial ways a very different book than *Fixers*. The French work, while laying the groundwork for the conceptualization of fixers, calls attention to the fact that fixers are indispensable today and advocates for them. *Fixers*, an American publication, is an erudite tour de force in medieval scholarship. In it I see the culmination of Stahuljak's decades-long research and study as a medievalist on relevant matters from historiography and narrativity to Francophone civilization and the writing of encounter.

As a contribution to the Global Ages and history of the book, *Fixers* is a great book about humans in a particular period of history who took an interest in foreign languages, cultures, and communities. It is a book about people like us, who study and teach foreign languages and literature, and who facilitate communication and exchange. Presenting the fixer model as the way forward, where translating and transforming oneself and the other is understood to be indispensable to the making of the self, *Fixers* is an optimistic book. I would like to think Stahuljak is right. I can be more pessimistic than Stahuljak about the state of the world today, where nationalism and identitarian politics have seen an upsurge. Still, I hope she is right. May fixers may transform the world, for the better.

CONTRIBUTOR

Margaret Kim is Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Tsing Hua University. She received her PhD in English from Harvard University. Her research interests include the Global Middle Ages, the Mongol empire, and medieval orientalism.