CHAPTER THREE

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE TRANSLATION OF *CALILA E DIMNA*

In 1251, in Toledo, an anonymous scholar translated the popular collection of tales known as *Calila e Dimna* from Arabic into Castilian. He first produced a rough, direct translation from the Arabic, then a second version which was more polished and Castilian-sounding. The man who commissioned the translation was Alfonso X the Learned, who was about to become the King of Castile and León (1252–1284). He was a great patron of science and literature, in particular of the translation of scientific treatises from Arabic into Castilian. He could not have predicted the influence his translation of *Calila e Dimna* would have on the development of Western literature, no way to know that it would inspire such canonical works as Don Juan Manuel’s *Conde Lucanor*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. At the time he was merely doing his part to bestow upon Castile a unique cultural patrimony drawn from the centuries-old tradition of Arabic scholarship in Iberia and for the first time, rendered into the official language of his kingdom, Castilian.

Because my argument is that the frametale was a medieval Iberian genre that engendered a common literary experience across religious, linguistic, and political groups, I am most concerned with how this text was *experienced* by Arabic and Castilian audiences. Accordingly, the present study centers more on the cultural significance of certain symbolic values of characters and situations within the narrative of the Arabic and Castilian translations of *Kalīla*, rather than on analysis of individual tales or of the textual history of the work.1 The translation of a work as popular as *Kalīla* brings about a commonality between audiences of the Arabic and Castilian versions—a secular commonality defined not by a common religion or language, but by a common literary experience. My aim is a reading of *Calila* as a window

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1 On these topics, see Montiel and Penzol for the textual history of *Calila e Dimna*, and Marsan on the individual tales in the context of medieval Iberian short narrative. Of particular interest is Girón Negrón’s recent study of the artistic specificity of the Arabic, Hebrew, and Castilian translations of the tale of the barber, the shoemaker, and their wives (“Go-between”).
into the medieval Castilian cultural personality and how it set the stage for the flourishing of the frametale genre in such works as Don Juan Manuel’s *Conde Lucanor* and Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de buen amor*.

In this chapter I will locate the translation of *Kalīla* into Castilian in its political and cultural context, focusing on the importance of translation in the development of the emergent Castilian literature and culture of the late Middle Ages. I will demonstrate that one of the chief reasons for the successful reception of *Calila* is that its moral didactic program was compatible with the experience of Christian Castilian audiences, despite the work’s origin in a Muslim, Arabic milieu.

For this type of analysis, it is more productive to study *Calila* as an act of translation and reception within a literary system, rather than as a textual artifact, a translated text. Here *Calila* as an object of analysis is not simply a physical text, but as a group of interlocking literary activities: the act of translation, the production and consumption of the translation, and the significance of these activities for the emergent Castilian literary system.

The concept of the literary polysystem was pioneered by Itamar Even-Zohar, whose work on the interrelated Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew literatures of Europe and Israel signalled a need for a functionalist approach that could be applied to literary systems producing texts in more than one language. This concept has been cultivated as an analytical tool primarily by scholars examining European literary systems featuring two or more languages in close contact. Building on Roman Jakobson’s ideas on spoken communication, Even-Zohar conceived the literary system as a set of relationships and activities. This approach goes beyond the study of a canonical list of “masterpieces” to embrace all types of literary activities, and all types of texts, regardless of the literary value subsequently placed on those texts by critics and institutions. The polysystem approach represents itself as more empirical than traditional literary studies that are controlled by institutional factors, such as canonicity, and turns a critical eye on the institutions themselves that foment literary activities.

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2 Even-Zohar defines a literary system as “the network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called ‘literary,’ and consequently these activities themselves observed via that network” (“Literary System” 28).

3 Even-Zohar first introduced his theories in “Israeli.” He then published his and others’ work on the topic in the inaugural issue of *Poetics Today* (1979). On the theory’s application to cultural studies see Catryse, Even-Zohar (“Factors” and “Making”), and the other essays included in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 24.1 (1997). See Iglesias Santos on its application to Latin American literary systems and Codde for a comprehensive overview of polysystems theory and its reception.