Macaronic Poetry in the Carmina Burana

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"doch rennet in allen der Marner vor,
der lustic Tiutsch und schoen Latin
als ein frischen brunnen und starken win
gemischet hat in sueze gedoene."

Hugo von Trimberg, Der Renner.

Loosely speaking," says the Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, "the term ‘macaronic verse’ has... been applied to any verse mingling two or more languages together...". The first and the worst problem confronting the student of bilingual or multilingual poetry lies in the terminology. The term “macaronic verse”, with its pasta-comic overtones, seems an Italian invention of the late fifteenth century; the Renaissance game which it denoted, the writing of verse which “incorporates words of the writer’s native tongue in another language and subjects them to its grammatical laws, thus achieving a comic effect”, retained its popularity through the nineteenth century. But this narrowly-defined genre was preceded by a long and rich Medieval tradition of poetic bi- and multilingualism of such variety (from random appearance of isolated foreign words in texts predominantly in a given language, to regular alternation of two or more languages within a fixed poetic form, including syntactic merging thereof) that the phenomenon is scarcely describable. For the random appearance of isolated Latin words in German texts, August Grünwald used the term “lateinische

1 Cited by Philipp Strauch, ed., Der Marner, Strassburg, Trübner, 1876, p. 5. (Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach- und Culturgeschichte der germanischen Völker, 15; now reprinted in the series Deutsche Neudrucke, Reihe: Mittelalter, with Afterword, Index and Bibliography by Helmut Brackert, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1965).
3 Loc. cit. For a concise history of this form and a review of English scholarship thereupon in the nineteenth century, see the "Introduction" to William O. Wehrle, The macaronic hymn tradition in medieval English literature, Washington D. C., Catholic University of America, 1933, pp. xi-xxxxi.
Einschiebsel"; Otto Müller applied the same term to the whole range of the medieval phenomenon. For the phenomenon in toto, Emil Henrici used the term barbarolexis – a creation of Medieval Latin, and ambiguously defined in the various medieval artes rhetoricae and poeticae, while Wehrle called it simply “macaronic poetry”. Sister Carmeline Sullivan, apparently following both Grünewald and Wehrle, distinguished between “Latin insertions” and macaronic poetry properly. Paul Zumthor, attempting to avoid this (barbaro-) lexical confusion, coins the inclusive term “poésie bilingue”, which ignores the admittedly rare phenomenon of deliberately multilingual texts. Out of respect for tradition, I shall “speak loosely” and retain for this essay the term “macaronic poetry” to refer to the Medieval phenomenon described.

A history of Medieval “macaronic” poetry remains to be written. Sister Sullivan deals only with a single work, and Wehrle’s study, though comprehensive for the English language-area, ignores the internationality of the phenomenon and is marred by his use of secondary sources for his texts; Müller ignores texts whose mixture does not include Latin, and Zumthor’s essay is essentially a rearrangement of Müller’s material; Grünewald and Henrici restrict themselves to German-Latin poetry in the twelfth and fifteenth centuries respectively. A necessary prelude to any general historical investigation of this form is therefore the task of filling the unstudied gaps. The present essay will fill only a small chink. I wish to call attention to a small but perhaps unique corpus of Medieval macaronic poetry which, in the words of the epigraph, “lustic Tiutsch und schoen Latin . . . gemischet hat in süez gedoene”: the macaronic poems of the Carmina Burana.

The multilingual material in the predominantly Latin Codex Buranus is of six sorts: 1) isolated German or Romance words in Latin texts, the true “Einschiebsel”; 2) Latin poems with refrain in another language; 3) poems with regular alternation of Latin and German or Romance;

2 Das lateinische Einschiebsel in der französischen Literatur des Mittelalters, Zürich, Leemann, 1919.
3 Sprachmischung in älterer Dichtung Deutschlands und Barbarolexis: Sprachmischung in älteren Schriften Deutschlands, Berlin, Fischer, 1913 and 1914; the two volumes are continuously paginated. Henrici lists the principal medieval references pp. 1-5.
4 The Latin insertions and the macaronic verse in Piers Plowman, Washington D. C., Catholic University of America, 1932.
5 "Un problème d’esthétique médiévale: l’utilisation poétique du bilinguisme", Moyen Age 66 (1960) 301-336 and 561-594; Zumthor does, however, discuss multilingual texts briefly, pp. 588-590.