A Renaissance for Medieval Classics

For nearly 70 years, Harvard’s scholarly outpost at Dumbarton Oaks, in Washington, D.C., has housed one of the world’s greatest collections of material relating to Byzantine studies, while also providing an academic home for some of the field’s foremost scholars (see “Home of the Humanities,” May–June 2008, page 48). As of this fall, after more than a decade of planning, it will also give its name to a new series of medieval texts published by Harvard University Press (HUP)—making a bit of Dumbarton Oaks more accessible in Cambridge (and everywhere else) than ever before.

The Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (DOML) is modeled on the 512-volume (and growing) Loeb Classical Library, whose distinctive, tidy green and red hardcover editions of Greek and Latin texts with facing-page translations have become an informal emblem of classical studies during the past century (see “Renewal of a Classic,” September–October 1993, page 48). The new venture began in the late 1990s with Porter professor of medieval Latin Jan Ziolkowski’s wish for a similar public face for medieval literature. Now general editor of DOML, Ziolkowski recalls that there “wasn’t really anything that could serve the same functions as the Loeb for the medieval period, and that was a frustration for me as I thought about trying to communicate my field to a wider public.” The project incubated until Ziolkowski was appointed director of Dumbarton Oaks in the summer of 2007, when he began to discuss the process of bringing it into existence with HUP.

Sharmila Sen, general editor for the humanities at HUP, oversees DOML (www.hup.harvard.edu/collection.php?cpk-1320) as well as its predecessors and companions, the Loeb Classical Library and I Tatti Renaissance Library (see “Rereading the Renaissance,” March–April 2006, page 34). “There is a thousand-year gap between Loeb and I Tatti, so DOML performs a much-needed function of making those missing years come alive,” she says. “We benefit a lot from having learned how to publish the Loeb and I Tatti, and we hope that we can take those lessons and use them to help this new series grow.” Yet “every period is very different,” she explains: “The world of Renaissance Latin requires very different things than the world of classical Greek and Latin, and this is equally true of Dumbarton Oaks: the field of medieval studies has its own contingencies, its own challenges. You cannot blindly follow the Loeb model.”

For one thing, unlike the Loeb series, which covers only classical Greek and Latin, DOML will publish texts in medieval Latin, Byzantine Greek, and Old English, and expand, potentially, to works written in other medieval vernacular languages. Because scholars with equal expertise in all these languages are rare, the series has separate editorial committees (headed by professor of English Daniel Donoghue for Old English; Danuta Shanzer, professor of classics and medieval studies at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign, for medieval Latin; and historian Alice-Mary Talbot ’60, former director of Byzantine studies at Dumbarton Oaks, for Byzantine Greek). Furthermore, the form of the languages themselves is less standardized, and DOML will expose a lesser-known part of the history of each. “On the value-added principle, I’ve been trying to have us work with texts where we can keep a medieval spelling,” Ziolkowski explains. “It’s going to throw people who are trained in classical Latin, to get some of the spellings that we’ve got, I feel no doubt about that; however, they’ll have the English alongside to help them get accustomed to it, so I hope the novelty will excite people rather than deter them.”

But Ziolkowski also hopes the series will appeal more broadly, serving both the lay reader and the specialist. “You have to appeal to a wide audience, but also satisfy the erudite people,” he explains. This approach has also informed the selection of the texts for DOML: “I’ve been trying to strike a balance between something that people will have heard of before, and then some texts that are quite off the beaten path.”

Three titles will formally open the project. The Pentateuch of Saint Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible—the first part of a projected five-volume edition of the complete Vulgate—is paired with the seventeenth-century Douay–Rheims translation en face for the first time. A second volume, also in medieval Latin, presents two separate manuscripts of secular Latin poetry from the twelfth century: a collection known as the Arundel lyrics, which comprises love songs, Christmas poems, and ecclesiastic satires, as well as the work of a poet known as Hugh Primas—whom Ziolkowski compares to “a Beat Generation poet” in terms of the cultural position and effect of his work.

The third volume of the initial release, and the first in Old English, presents the full Beowulf manuscript: not just the eponymous poem, but also the four other works included in the single, centuries-old, manuscript that preserved the Anglo-Saxon epic into the modern era. “Dan Donoghue was amazingly adept at get-
DOML will have its own signature appearance. “One of the first things that anyone asks us, when we talk about the project, is ‘What color?’” Sen says. “I Tatti has a very lovely light blue color scheme, and we decided to do something different: a kind of metallic light bronze. These are going to be jewel-like books.” The three series’ complementary visual appearance is far from accidental, underlining their shared vision of producing accessible, high-quality editions of important literature in their original languages. Sen hopes the three collections, together with the forthcoming Hackmey Hebrew Classical Library and Murty Classical Library of India, will present an unparalleled set of tools for “a whole new generation of scholars who might be able to do a completely new type of research,” explaining, “I don't think there’s any other publisher in the world right now who can present such an extensive and exhaustive list of classical titles across these languages.”

Ziolkowski agrees. “Every morning I walk past the inscription from the bequest [for Dumbarton Oaks],” he says, “‘The Dumbarton Oaks Research Library has been assembled...that the continuity of scholarship in the Byzantine and mediaeval humanities may remain unbroken,’”

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—SPENCER LENFIELD