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Welcome from the Editors-in-Chief

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Welcome from the Editors-in-Chief

And from beneath the yoke Xanthos spoke back,
Hooves shimmering, his head bowed so low
That his mane swept the ground, as Hera,
The white-armed goddess, gave him a voice [...]

— *The Iliad*, Book XIX

Xanthos is the name of Achilles' immortal horse who defied the Furies by daring to speak. This story, part of a wider mythological tradition we have inherited from ancient Greece, does not seem foreign to us. Foreign literature is a problematic concept, and what is meant by 'foreign' is not altogether obvious. Literature created beyond the borders of the Anglophone world is, for academic purposes, foreign. Yet, where would our literature be without Homer, Virgil, Dante, or Perrault? Can these various figures, whether famous or anonymous, who sang or composed in languages which were certainly not English, truly be regarded as 'foreign'? It is difficult to say. Literature composed in the English language is the inheritor of Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Old Norse writings and cultures, among others — cultures which have become so prevalent, so ubiquitous, so ingrained, embracing our language and our thinking so completely, that they have long ago ceased to be foreign and have become our own. We have, in short, assimilated them.

Significantly, there is something distinctly *less foreign* about the poetry of Verlaine than there is about the poetry of Si Mohand ou-Mhand, who is regarded as the 'Berber Verlaine' and whose poetry is translated in this volume. The difference is that the French Verlaine has been assimilated, while the Berber Verlaine has not. *Xanthos: A Journal of Foreign Literatures and Languages* was begotten partly by the desire to present in English for the first time writing such as that of ou-Mhand, and a theme throughout this first issue is the translation of texts that do not form part of the accepted story of English literature. However, today, when English is the official language in more than 70 countries and over 40% of known languages are defined as 'vulnerable', 'endangered' or 'extinct' by UNESCO, there seems to be a sort of violence at the heart of translating those more foreign writers, who still exist beyond the reach of Western influence.¹ Perhaps we are ethically bound to leave this literature of the other undisturbed, untranslated, and unknown. This, then, becomes the challenge for *Xanthos* and all academic ventures which work at the tense intersection of language and culture: to translate foreign writing and yet permit it to remain foreign, to permit it to continue existing in its irreducible otherness.

Much has been written in recent years on the 'crisis' in languages within the United Kingdom, from the slump in the number of students studying languages to the concomitant impact of a lack of trained linguists on commercial exports; more recently, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages has gone so far as to propose a 'national recovery

¹ UNESCO, 'Towards World Atlas of Languages' <<https://en.unesco.org/news/towards-world-atlas-languages>>. All sites cited in this introduction were accessed 16 April 2019.

programme’ to remedy this decline.² The case for languages and intercultural awareness, however, must be about more than economic imperatives. As Gerda Wielander rightly noted in her visionary editorial to the first issue of the *Modern Languages Open* journal,

[...] the discipline of Modern Languages and Cultures is not just about enabling conversation between people who already know they want to talk to one another. Rather, it is the cultural knowledge produced by academics working in language-based areas studies, translation studies and intercultural communication which helps bring people together in the first place.³

It is in this spirit that *Xanthos* was born. As Modern Languages departmental budgets are slashed all across the country, there is an ever-greater need for platforms which are uniquely positioned to explore the intersection of language and culture, and as such we aim to publish literary-critical and theoretical approaches to foreign literature, comparative literature, classical reception, translation, and linguistics.

Our inaugural issue begins in France, first through an analysis of the place of so-called ‘immigrant’ literature in the modern French publishing landscape and the need to ‘destabilise the self / “Other” binary’. Also concerned with literature perceived as marginal, our second article deals with the writings of Madame du Châtelet and how the materiality of her texts is a witness to both the importance and success of her contribution to the largely male-dominated world of the sciences in the eighteenth century. Looking even further back in time, the following article offers a translation of an excerpt from *Perceforest*, a fourteenth-century French romance whose increasing significance in the field of medieval studies calls for broader reach. This naturally transitions into the second translation in this volume, of the medieval Spanish *Crónica particular de San Fernando*, which is accompanied by a methodological analysis. Our presentation of translations continues with a rendering of a selection of Berber poems by Si Mohand ou-Mhand. Through its final contributions, *Xanthos* then reflects upon the nature of translation itself, and the issues inherent to its practice. An investigation into translating *Luuanda* ‘explore[s] the ways in which cultural difference can be mediated and recreated through translative practices’, offering some measure of insight into the never-ceasing questions raised in this introduction. Our final piece moves beyond traditional literary-critical boundaries. It features a practising composer interpreting translation in the broadest possible sense to embrace the multimodal dialogue between musical and written language, demonstrating the hermeneutic potential of music when it communes with the poetry of Federico García Lorca.

The articles in our first issue attest to the values of Modern Languages research writ large: an appreciation of difference, a search for sensitivity, and a desire to engage on equal terms with linguistic and cultural frameworks that are both familiar and unfamiliar to us. Gerda Wiedelander, in her introduction to *Modern Languages Open*, champions this approach, noting that ‘The study of another culture [...] will invariably be extremely limited if English is the only linguistic and cultural framework through which such study is approached [...]’. We are proud, through both our commitment to Open Access and the range of languages

² Branwen Jeffreys, ‘Language learning: German and French drop by half in UK schools’, *BBC News*, 27 February 2019 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-47334374>>. ‘MPs and Peers in urgent call for a National Recovery Programme to revolutionise language skills in the UK’, <<https://www.britishcouncil.org/contact/press/mps-and-peers-urgent-call-national-recovery-programme-revolutionise-language-skills-uk>>.

³ Gerda Wielander, ‘In defence of Modern Languages’, *Modern Languages Open*, 1 <<https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i1.40>>.

considered in our first issue, to echo this statement, and to make the case for an active, engaging, and welcoming *Modern Languages*.

Harold Bloom famously balked at the approach to literature as an epiphenomenon, as a product of political or historical circumstance. Bloom is correct to point out that literature, whether it is Madame du Châtelet's scientific writings or Si Mhand ou-Mhand's poetry, is not simply or solely an object of knowledge; it is a source of knowledge, too. Thus, the potential violence we commit by the process of translation is explained (not justified, but explained) by our pursuit of a wider cultural scope, a keener eye, and a more sensitive ear, exemplified by those narratives which, in their foreignness, will make us better readers, better writers, better translators, and, hopefully, better people.