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Book Review: Cultures in Contact: Translation and Reception of I promessi sposi in 19th Century England. Eds. Intonti, Vittoria & Rosella Mallardi

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Cultures in Contact: Translation and Reception of I promessi sposi in 19th Century England. Eds. Vittoria Intonti & Rosella Mallardi. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2011. 407 pp. \$100.95.

Cultures in Contact: Translation and Reception of I promessi sposi in 19th Century England fills a void in Manzoni studies by considering translation and reception together in one volume. This compilation of essays, edited by

University of Bari English professors Vittoria Intonti and Rosella Mallardi, focuses on translations across languages and in comparison to Manzoni's original, and related decisions to omit, condense, and change certain passages. This important volume, which delineates the history behind relevant translation theories, reveals the inter-textual relationship of translations from various languages as well as the intercultural dynamic between target and source literatures.

A volume that examines the history and theory of translation studies is appropriate when we consider Manzoni's lifelong passion for questions involving language. Fluent in both the Milanese dialect and in French, Manzoni constantly translated from one cultural context to another beginning at an early age. Towards the end of his life, he headed the commission on language for the newly unified Italian state. The document issued by that group, *L'unità della lingua italiana e i mezzi per diffonderla/ On Linguistic Unity and the Means of Promoting It* (1868), identified Florentine—the spoken language of the educated elite, not the language of the medieval writers Dante and Boccaccio—as the national language for Italy. Manzoni's historical novel provided another occasion to work with language: he edited his own work as he transformed the first version of the novel, entitled *Fermo e Lucia* (1823), into *I promessi sposi* (1827). The writer's visit to Florence in 1827 allowed him to “wash” the pages of the second version in the waters of the Arno so that the definitive version of *I promessi sposi*, which appeared in print in 1840, was free of Manzoni's Lombard dialect.

The premise of *I promessi sposi* is the re-writing of a Baroque text the author had discovered. Hence the *raison d'être* of this book is another book, which the narrator has decided not to transcribe but rather to re-write in a language accessible to the contemporary reading public. The narrator's work mirrors that of the translator who must first unravel the meaning of the original and then re-state it in words that a reader from another time period, or of another mother tongue in the case of a translation, can comprehend. The critical distance between author and text allows the writer to critique his own work from an outside or “foreign” perspective. Manzoni, as narrator, exercises this option when he interjects opinions that emphasize the differences and similarities between two distinct cultural moments, Spanish-ruled Milan of the 17th century and the author's own 19th century world.

This volume considers Manzoni's writing in the greater European context. It describes the importance of the Grand Tour and the presence of Italian émigrés abroad for the dissemination of the novel on the continent and in Britain. Manzoni, whose plays and famous ode on the death of

Napoleon in 1821, “Il cinque maggio,” transcended national boundaries, was actively engaged with the promotion of his texts both inside and outside Italy. His prominence in the international literary community resulted in contact between cultures in the nineteenth century. This volume points to the near simultaneity of translations; French, German, and English editions of the novel appeared within weeks of one another. Manzoni’s knowledge of French allowed him to converse with translators of his novel in that language. As *Cultures in Contact* demonstrates, these conversations not only influenced translations but also informed subsequent versions of the novel. Since Manzoni did not have the same facility with English as he did with French, translations in that language did not include the author’s intimate knowledge of his text.

When we read of Manzoni’s English translators privileging the French translations, which proved much more accessible than the Italian original, we recall Manzoni’s description of the process which the protagonist Renzo and Agnese, Lucia’s mother, employ to correspond with one another. Manzoni calls the scribe that each party uses a *turcimanno*, which derives from the Arabic *targuman* meaning high official designated to act as translator in medieval Eastern courts. Here the semiotic shift of the translator’s domain from elite world of the court to a decidedly more plebeian realm underscores the mystery of writing for the illiterate protagonists of the novel. Manzoni’s narrator reminds the reader of the power that the translator yields by focusing on the double filter created by two scribes, the one who interprets what he thinks the sender wishes to relate and the other who must interpret what the first has written for the recipient. Thus the reader of the translated text resembles the illiterate betrothed of the title since both must literally put themselves in another’s hands in order to understand the words on the page.

By focusing on the convergence of translation studies and cultural studies, *Cultures in Contact* goes beyond Augustus Pallotta’s seminal study of British and American translations of Manzoni’s novel (*Italica*, 1973, vol. 50, no. 4, 483–523) to consider the reception of Manzoni’s text in the wider cultural context of the English-speaking world. As is common in edited volumes organized around a particular theme, some information is redundant. This only slightly detracts from what is otherwise a powerful, well-reasoned examination of the reception and translation of Manzoni’s work. Indeed this volume provides the modern reader with profound insights into the cultural exchanges in Europe that accompanied the appearance of the first historical novel in the Italian tradition.

This volume’s appreciation of the difficulty of translating Manzoni’s novel into English is its greatest strength. We come to understand the

subtlety of *I promessi sposi* by what is lacking in the various translations. The Italian author paid particular attention to the nuances of idiomatic speech, and struggled to express them in a language that was accessible to a wide reading public, not just an elite few. The challenges that Manzoni faced as he re-worked his prose resembled those that Italy faced after unification in 1861 when it struggled to determine the one language that would help unite the newly formed state. The lack of linguistic cohesion on the Italian peninsula appears even greater when compared to the unity of expression enjoyed by other European countries such as France, Germany, and England. As this volume eloquently points out, often times English translators of *I promessi sposi* did not understand its irony, the rhetorical device that Manzoni wielded with aplomb. They faced the difficult task of translating idioms from dialect, while suffering from a lack of linguistic competence in Italian and consequent dependence on French translations, as well as from a relative ignorance about the Italian literary tradition. It is no wonder then that Manzoni's playful and energetic prose tends to lack the brilliance of the original Italian when translated into English. Misreadings of the original, such as Swan's erroneous interpretation of Manzoni's ironic citation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, make the Italian reader appreciate the author's genius even more. By focusing on some of the failures of the English translations of *I promessi sposi*, *Cultures in Contact* reminds those of us who have read the novel in the original of the world that Manzoni invents through detailed descriptions of characters and historical events. This volume notes that such "digressions" provoked criticisms of Manzoni's novel by several English translators.

The title of this volume declares its primary focus on the translation and reception of the first Italian historical novel in England, rather than in the United States. Yet the fact that Edgar Allan Poe, an American man of letters, reviewed Manzoni's novel, while paying particular attention to the stories of Gertrude and Cecilia, leaves the reader hankering for more information. How many other 19th century writers in the United States read and were influenced by Manzoni? This is indeed a topic for a future investigation.

Cultures in Contact investigates how the reception of a translated text reflects what is happening in the country where it is released. By examining the Catholic moral teachings that underpin the novel, this volume articulates the power of cultural contexts to determine the fortune of a literary work. The novel's reception varied according to the relations between Catholics and Protestants in England. Translators themselves reflected these tensions when they critiqued the more Catholic elements of the novel; Charles Swan, for example, did not agree with Lucia's assumption that Mary could dissolve her vow. As we look across the Atlantic, *Cultures in Contact* perhaps

helps us understand the reasons why Hollywood, unlike Italian cinema and television, has not discovered *I promessi sposi*. We ask as well why there is so little discussion of Manzoni's great novel in academic circles throughout the United States. Those of us in America may wonder if the lack of interest in Manzoni's text says more about us than about his work.

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