

TRAVELS AND TRANSLATIONS: ANGLO-ITALIAN CULTURAL TRANSACTIONS
EDITED BY ALISON YARRINGTON, STEFANO VILLANI, AND JULIA KELLY

Travels and Translations: Anglo-Italian Cultural Transactions, Alison Yarrington, Stefano Villani, and Julia Kelly (eds). Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. €110.00. ISBN: 9789042037670.

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From the third international conference of the cycle *In Medias Res: British-Italian Cultural Transactions*, held at the University of Pisa in 2008, comes this substantial collection of essays addressing travel writing and translation as a key part of the cultural interaction between England and Italy from the Middle Ages to the present. The core interest of the book lies indeed in exploring travel writing and translation as ‘contact zones’ between cultures, where cultural prestige and power relations are often in interplay.

The variety of backgrounds of editors and authors, spanning history, art, and social sciences, ensures that the essays in the collection take a highly interdisciplinary, often comparative approach. Throughout the collection, gathered ‘in an exploratory spirit’ (5), the focus is very much on the history of culture. Literary texts are interrogated less as artworks than as documents of the historical and social circumstances in which they were generated, allowing for more-or-less new, sometimes amusing, sometimes disquieting discoveries about intercultural encounters and national myths.

Franco Marengo’s essay, ‘Some New Bearings in Travel Literature’ provides the theoretical grounding for the whole collection by recalling the eternal dialectics between factual experience and narrative fiction that lies at the very core of travel writing. The travelogue’s fundamental purpose is in fact ‘to interrogate the other, and to devise a code capable of rendering the other’s alterity in comprehensible terms for the “folks at home” [...]’. In other words, travelogues are exercises in translation’ (19). This particular act of translation poses specific cultural challenges, for, Marengo adds, to travel means to move from a comfortable centre to an unknown periphery, with all the dangers of alienation and the opportunities for self-discovery that this implies.

Through its five thematic sections, ‘Travellers and Travelogues’, ‘Italian Geographies’, ‘Appropriating Italy’, ‘Textual Translation’, and ‘Using Translation’ the book explores the constitutive elements of facts, fiction and translation in different combinations and functions. Within each section, the essays are arranged according to the chronological order of their subject matter; the sections themselves seem to follow a certain chronology, the first opening with Renaissance travelogues and the last concluding with a review of two Shakespeare productions in Rome in 2006. This compromise between subject grouping and chronological arrangement makes apparent the extent to which thematic boundaries are blurred: the section on Travelogues includes indeed the study of translated texts, while the two parts on Translation address issues of appropriation and otherness that could very well belong in other groupings. In addition, some constant aspects of the cultural encounters between England and Italy recur across sections, suggesting a sense of continuity that would have been made clearer, in my view, by a fully chronological presentation.

When read in historical order, indeed, keeping travelogues and translations together, the variously themed essays lose their miscellaneous appearance and convey a coherent sense of the evolution of Anglo-Italian cultural relations through time. An important clarification, however, is required in this sense: possibly because the majority of the contributors come from English Studies, throughout the book the gaze is univocally directed from England to Italy. We read about the reception, translation and use of Italian material in England, and of English accounts of travel to Italy. The only exception, Nick Pearce’s study of the

opera *L'Oracolo* by Franco Leoni, adapted from an American source, does not show any Italian view of Englishness, but rather focuses on the stereotypical perception of San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1930s. Thus, in this collection of historical explorations, Italian culture is invariably positioned on the 'other' side.

If we experimentally rearrange the essay topics along a historical continuum to get an account of the evolution of the English consideration of Italy through time, from the very beginning an interesting detail emerges: the most ancient texts considered in this study, which ideally characterise the seminal stage of modern Anglo-Italian cultural interaction, are mainly translations. This testifies of a phase of high receptivity on the part of England, which had much to gain from the then more developed Italian culture. Chaucer's interpretive translation of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* as *Troilus and Cryseide* (1382), is a case in point: in William Rossiter's view, in fact, it 'provides the very bedrock of the English literary tradition, thereby confirming polysystem theory's assertion of translation's centrality within the development of a given culture' (237).

Where more modern material is considered, instead, the focus shifts from translations to travelogues, through which English writers recount their more or less fantastic journeys in Italy as part of the Grand Tour or in different contexts. From these examples, under the age-specific nuances evolving from Enlightenment rationalism to Romantic sensibility and Imperialistic condescendence, a mixed feeling of expectation and prejudice emerges as an enduring aspect of the travellers' approach. An ambivalent veneration of Italy's great beauty and glorious past, entwined with contempt for its contemporary political and moral corruption, comes across as a constant of the English view through the centuries, so that, taken as a whole, this gallery of travel writings also traces a genealogy of some of the longest-lived stereotypes about Italy which we can still find familiar in the present.

The interest and quality of each of the single contributions in this volume will appear different to any reader according to their own backgrounds and areas of research. I particularly appreciated Barbara Schaff's amusing presentation of the *Handbooks of Travel-Talk*, Selene Scarsi's account of Tofte's translation of Ariosto, and Luigi Cazzato's analysis of the contrast between North and South in the poetry of W.H. Auden. Interesting and enjoyable was also Stephen Ogel's review of the 2006 Roman productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*, although we could reasonably wonder whether the element of freshness and freedom that the author so appreciated in those interpretations was really linked to the company being specifically Italian or, rather, simply non-English.

Overall, *Travels and Translations* maintains its promises, presenting for our consideration, through the example of Anglo-Italian interactions, the complexities of cultural exchange, where power relations are inescapably involved. By doing so, it also reminds us of the constitutive bewilderment and anxiety produced by the traveller's encounter with otherness, which sometimes poses, in Marengo's words, 'an insuperable limit to his understanding' (22). In the face of this limit, it is useful to bear in mind that 'there is no need to find a conclusive, circular meaning shared by lands, cultures, and mentalities so different and so far apart. Meaning lies in the [...] ever-elusive, ever-inadequate description – carried by words always subject to misunderstanding and hybridisation' (22-23). The book makes for smooth and enjoyable reading, which will particularly benefit scholars of literature, history and cultural studies, proposing interesting perspectives on the cultural value of translation and travel writing, and offering stimulating food for thought on the centuries-long evolution of the English view of Italy.