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Selene Scarsi, *Translating Women in Early Modern England: Gender in the Elizabethan Versions of Boiardo, Ariosto and Tasso*

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REFERENCES

Selene Scarsi, *Translating Women in Early Modern England: Gender in the Elizabethan Versions of Boiardo, Ariosto and Tasso* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 207 p., ISBN 9780754666202

- 1 The last opus in Ashgate's collection on Anglo-Italian Renaissance Studies (dir. Michele Marrapodi), Selene Scarsi's monograph on *Translating Women in Early Modern England*, is a successful double endeavour: it reveals deliberate early modern male misreading and mistranslation of feminine figures and explores English Renaissance 'translatorship' (3) through the perspective of female characterisation. Scarsi's book revisits Anglo-Italian literary exchanges during the Renaissance by offering both a varied critical analysis of Renaissance translation based on the major and most recent Anglo-American and European critiques on the subject, and new analytical explorations of three major works of Italian epic poetry and their English translations.
- 2 Scarsi's chosen corpus comprises Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and Boiardo's *Orlando Inamorato* for all make female characters essential elements of their poetics. However she also points out that the English translators of these three works altered the specific types of feminine figures found in the Italian texts and analyses their translation method as deliberate misogyny (20-23; 187-90). In her introduction, Scarsi starts arguing the "methodical silencing and denigration of Ariosto's positive heroines" in Harington's translation. She uses such indictment as a

starting point for her analysis of the erasure of female exemplary figures from English translations, or rather of the English translation of women into elliptical or male figures.

- 3 The first part of Scarsi's book is dedicated to the largely previously ignored Sir John Harrington's "(Mis)translating Women" in his 1591 version of *Orlando Furioso*. Scarsi reworks the study of Harrington's translating methods and offers an enriching comparative view of the typology of female characters Harrington mangled and rebuilt to his own misogynistic purpose. She stresses the "proto-feminist" nature of Ariosto's poem by relying on Anglo-American as well as European criticism (almost systematically translated or glossed into English), and shows how "in Harrington the women only manage to complete the journey when they find an easier, alternative option" (27). She reveals how women are denied any peripatetic success and ontological density and development in Harrington's translation. Their strength, their wit and even their sensuality is toned down almost to the point of complete ellipsis in this English translation (45–9). Interestingly, she adds another layer to the study of fictional and historical feminine figures and raises the question of literary patronesses and women poets in both Ariosto and Harrington. Thus she traces back Harrington's methodical "silencing of the accomplishments" of literary women to the well-disseminated cliché in early modern England of the problematic speaking woman and of "the traditional Renaissance association between 'unbridled speech' and female unchastity" (70).
- 4 Scarsi decides in her second part to confront the somehow problematic translation of the feminine to Renaissance translation theory. Leaving Harrington's misogynistic method aside, she is now comparing the rendering of feminine figures contained in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* in two types of English translations. Relying on translation theory and recalling Carew's use of transliteration (76–7) and Fairfax's choice of a moralised paraphrase (77–8), she sheds a new light on Harrington's sometimes misinterpreted moralising intentions. She shows through the choice of Tasso, whose style she defines as "unjudgemental" (109), that translators could sometimes opt for another type of recreation of female characters through the poetic filter of their own English contemporaries.
- 5 Drawing parallels between certain choices made by Carew and Fairfax and Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* and Samuel Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond*, Scarsi reveals another form of "mediating influence" (111). The only reproach we could make in these truly enlightening chapters is the loss of the initial argument on feminine figures that become suddenly ancillary to the debate on Renaissance translation theory. One could just regret that the specificity of strong feminine figures such as the Amazons (37–40) is mainly confined to the first part, and that Scarsi tones down this really interesting part of her study so as to move to translating and aesthetic issues in the last section of the book.
- 6 The second part is the touchstone for the third part of the opus dealing more specifically with the core of early modern aesthetics: "adaptations and imitations". Reducing the corpus to significant partial translations of the two previously explored poems, Scarsi adds another significant instance of translating negotiations with Tofte's rendering of Boiardo's *Orlando Enamorado* as well as Spenser's specific partial translation of Ariosto in *The Fairie Queene*. Scarsi distances her argument from her initial study of

the specificity of feminine characters so as to show “the attempt to emulate or imitate creatively as the primary aim form most of these partial or casual translators” (187).

- 7 Scarsi’s monograph offers both a clear and comprehensive overview of translation theory applied to early modern texts and enlightening analyses of major Italian poems of the period. The choice of a bilingual presentation of the primary sources, and the clear to-and-fro movements between older and new research on Anglo-Italian relations make this opus also available to readers not specialising in early modern Italian poetry or in Renaissance translation. Extending her comparative study to Scottish and French renditions of Italian epic poems, this monograph constitutes a strongly recommended companion for students and researchers in Renaissance translation, comparative literature and early modern gender representations.

INDEX

Keywords: Early Modern translation, Early Modern poetry and prose, gender, Elizabethan era, Italian poetry, translations

Mots-clés: traduction à la Renaissance, période élisabéthaine, prose et poésie des xv^e et xvii^e siècles, poésie italienne, traduction

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