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0521848962 - The Italian Encounter with Tudor England: A Cultural Politics of Translation

Michael Wyatt

Excerpt

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Introduction

It is not the literal past, the “facts of history”, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language.

Brian Friel, *Translations*

Translation functioned in the “long” sixteenth century as both a practice and a metaphor. The period saw an explosion of translation between European vernacular languages, a significant development which did much, in concert with other forces, to vitiate the powerful authority of classical culture, even as translations from Greek and Latin continued to abound. But translation also comes to describe in an increasingly suggestive manner the various modes of cultural transmission which constituted a central dimension of early modernity.

Translation – *tradurre* in Italian, *vertere* and *translatio* in Latin – is defined by John Florio as “to traduce, to transpose, to bring or leade over, to bring, to conway, to remove from one place to another. Also to translate from out of one tongue into another.”¹ Susan Sontag, in a recent essay on translation, evokes these and several other senses of the term as “to circulate, to transport, to disseminate, to explain, to make (more) accessible.”² Translation serves as a means of recovering access to the material culture of the past and its effects that the term “Renaissance” has denoted since Jules Michelet, Jacob Burckhardt, John Addington Symonds, and other scholars of the period took it up in the nineteenth century: retrieving the past, however, through a process mediated by the critical language of the present.³ Translation is as well a process that re-situates the cultural phenomena of a period variously demarcated – within the parameters of this study, the early fifteenth through the early seventeenth centuries – in a dynamic relation with the future characterized by the more recently coined “early modern.”⁴ Fundamental to both taxonomies – the one looking back, the other ahead – is the operation of displacement that Florio identifies with his work of translating the *Essais* of Montaigne:⁵ “What doe the best then, but gleane after others harvest? borrow their colours, inherite their possessions? What doe they but translate? perhaps,

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usurp? at least, collect?”⁶ This nexus of terms neatly encapsulates Florio’s career as a language teacher, lexicographer, and translator, serving to situate him as an emblematic representation of this compound understanding of translation and anticipating many of the concerns of this book.

Italian commerce with England is traceable from the thirteenth century, and by the early fifteenth century Italians other than merchants and bankers began to make their presence felt there. The earlier history of the Italian encounter with England forms a crucial component for understanding the context out of which Florio’s later accomplishments emerged. We consequently turn in the first part of this study, ‘*A parlar d’Inghilterra: Italians in and on Early Modern England*’, to a consideration of these relations in three historical chapters organized initially around the consolidation of Tudor power after the Wars of the Roses, but looking back to the first Italian humanists in England and moving forward through the period of Henry VIII’s divorce trial.⁷ Ambassadorial accounts, the effort to introduce a reasonable approach to English historical narrative, the significance of Italian ecclesiastical representation in the English church, and the presence of Italian artists in pre-Reformation England are matters we shall examine in the first chapter, “The two roses,” forming as they do useful instances of the discrepancies and synergies which characterized the earliest notable phase of the conjunction of Italian and English interests. We then turn – in “Reformations” – to the arrival of the Reformation in England in the latter part of Henry’s reign, its consolidation under Edward VI, and the short-lived Catholic reform of the Marian era. These decades of variously contrary reformations competing for control of English polity as well as for the minds and souls of the English people came to be registered in a diverse range of Italian literary, diplomatic, and religious writing (produced both in England and in Italy) – literature that will provide us with windows onto this transitional period often different (at times surprisingly so) from standard English accounts of the same history. The third chapter, “La Regina Helisabetta,” offers a variety of Italian images of the Tudor monarch most closely associated with Italian vernacular culture and presents a further assortment of Italians – merchants, a prominent aristocrat, musicians, and a new generation of religious refugees – active, but not always fully assimilated, in Elizabethan England.

The second section of the book, *John Florio and the Cultural Politics of Translation*, looks first – in “Language lessons” – at Florio’s work as a language teacher and author of two language-learning dialogue books, *Firste Frutes* (1578) and *Second Frutes* (1591), situating this activity within the wider implications of Italian *translatio* for Elizabethan cultural politics. The final chapter, “Worlds of words,” explores Florio the lexicographer, considering his unique contributions in this arena in relation to the

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contemporary Italian debate over the character of the Italian language, and with regard to the censorship of Italian books in light of the successive versions of the Catholic *Index librorum prohibitorum* or Index of Forbidden Books (beginning in 1559), the temporal parameters of this account encompassing both the first and second editions of Florio's dictionary, published first as *A Worlde of Wordes* in 1598 and subsequently as *Queen Anna's New World of Words* in 1611. I shall argue, as Frances Yates did in her first published monograph, that Florio and others like him have been mistakenly relegated to the sidelines of early modern cultural history, for though he produced no plays, poetry, or narrative prose of his own, Florio's work as a language merchant in Elizabethan and early Stuart England placed him squarely within the most important cultural currents of the period, and his achievements represent the culmination of a long and complex trajectory.⁸

The meaning of Florio's identity as an English-born Italian is of particular importance for understanding both his professional activities and the significance of the Italian presence in early modern England. Born in London to a mother of uncertain origins and an Italian father, Michelangelo, who had served as the first pastor of the Italian Protestant congregation in London, the younger Florio's early life is almost completely a matter of speculation. Shortly after John's birth, the family fled to Protestant Switzerland at the time of Mary Tudor's accession to the English crown, when the welcome that Edward VI had extended to continental Protestants was abruptly withdrawn.⁹ Whatever might be made of the scanty traces of the young John Florio, a number of issues about his early formation must necessarily remain open to question, not the least of which for our purposes is where to situate him linguistically, and hence culturally.¹⁰

Discussing the translation of Montaigne, Yates maintains that Florio "was translating from a language not his own into a language not his own,"¹¹ assuming that Italian was his mother tongue, but as Florio's mother could have been English he may well have grown up using both languages. His subsequent fluency in both Italian and English would seem to argue in favor of a sustained acquaintance with both,¹² but it is apparent in a number of respects that Italian was the language in which he found himself most at ease. As the son of an exiled heterodox Protestant minister, Florio would have had neither the opportunity nor the means to travel to or study in the urban centers of the Italian peninsula,¹³ and thus to a very high degree the cultural program that he did so much to advance in early modern England was acquired at a considerable distance from the context in which its various elements had developed.

As we shall see, this "virtual" aspect of Florio's Italian character is a crucial factor for appraising the cultural mediation he practiced in England. Such

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an identity raises fundamental questions about what it means to “inhabit” a culture, for while Florio moved easily between several linguistic and cultural worlds – never completely a part of any one of them – there is a distinctly performative (and hence artificial) dimension to his polyglot practice. This is not to diminish the significance of studying languages but rather to draw attention to the contingent and conditioned nature of such efforts, recognizing that language and its artefacts consistently resist our Sisyphean attempts to subdue them. Michael Holquist, writing about the centrality of philology to the foundation of Berlin’s Humboldt University in 1810, notes that language was initially considered essential to that institution’s pedagogical mission:

because in the study of foreign tongues students best learned the humility that comes from never forgetting that we are signs. The necessity to negotiate the otherness of the world that accompanies struggling to master alterity in other languages had . . . the capacity to provide students two gifts that any education should strive to give: positive knowledge of other cultures and a critical stance toward one’s own.¹⁴

But Holquist also cautions that the task of the language teacher is to remember “the ineluctable foreignness of language itself (even when we think we are speaking our mother tongue),”¹⁵ a point as apposite for the early modern history we shall be examining as it is for our contemporary world menaced by the narrow and frequently mistaken use of words which has resulted equally in horrific acts of terrorism and the continuing oppression of entire classes of people due to their differences from normative ideologies.¹⁶

Philology, the history of words, is a far cry from the irrelevancy it is too often dismissed as being. It retains its power to provoke critical insights, and we ignore its lessons at our peril, as Edward Said compellingly argues in the new introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Orientalism*, prepared shortly before his death. Praising Erich Auerbach’s ground-breaking comparative study, *Mimesis* (1946), Said notes that:

the main requirement for the kind of philological understanding Auerbach and his predecessors were talking about and tried to practice was one that sympathetically and subjectively entered into the life of a written text as seen from the perspective of its author. Rather than alienation and hostility to another time and culture, philology . . . involved a profound humanistic spirit deployed with generosity, and if I may use the word, hospitality. Thus the interpreter’s mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign “other.” And this creative making of a place for works that are otherwise alien and distant is the most important facet of the interpreter’s mission . . . humanism is the only, and I would go so far as to say the final, resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history.¹⁷

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An affirmation of the potential of words to allow us into a space different culturally or historically from our own, Said's reassertion of humanist values is a welcome reminder of why and how much a considered understanding of the operations of language does indeed matter.

A study engaged with philology should make as clear as possible the significance of the terminology which it employs repeatedly. In addition to words already noted, I use three others (and their derivatives) throughout the book in the following ways:

“Language”

Lingua, in one of Florio's digressive definitions, is “a tongue in general. Also a language or speech. Also the word given among soldiers. Also a little spattle or languet to take salves out of a boxe. Also a narrow piece of land or long ridge running into the Sea like a tongue lolling out of the mouth. Also a kind of hearbe good against the falling of the haire called Adders-tongue.”¹⁸ Jonathan Goldberg sheds further light on the word in suggesting that “*language* . . . subsum[es] such terms as *writing*, *discourse* [or, in the context of my fourth and fifth chapters, also ‘speaking’], *literature*, and *representation* [which should be understood here as also encompassing the ‘visual’].”¹⁹

“Politics”

Politica in Florio is “a book of Policie or civill government of a State,”²⁰ and for Goldberg “*politics* . . . refer[s] to those social processes in which relationships of power are conveyed [and additionally, following Florio's lead, the ‘communities’ and ‘institutions’ which give them shape].”²¹

“Culture”

Cultura for Florio is “husbandrie, tillage, manuring, ploughing,”²² and these horticultural associations of the word nicely complement its early modern figural sense associated with what the *OED* defines as “the cultivating or development of the mind, faculties, manners, etc.; improvement or refinement by education and training,” as well as its nineteenth-century evolution into “a particular form or type of intellectual development. Also, the civilization, customs, artistic achievements . . . of a people, especially at a certain stage of its development or history.”²³

The question of philology in early modern Europe is an especially loaded one, given the degree to which the region's principal conflicts throughout the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth centuries can be characterized as the result of the struggle to define or redefine certain words. Three factors contributed to England's linguistic instability in this period: the relative poverty of sixteenth-century English in comparison with the more developed vernacular languages and cultures of Italy, France, and Spain; the vitality of languages other than English in the Three Kingdoms; and the continuing utility of Latin as both a spoken and written language among the learned and professional classes.²⁴

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The presence of such “strangers” as Florio was a reminder, uncomfortable for many even otherwise sophisticated Englishmen, that theirs was a language used only in England (and not even universally there), as suggested by two of Florio’s interlocutors in *Firste Fruites* 27 [50r]²⁵:

*Che vi pare di questa lingua
inglese, ditemi di gratia.
E una lingua che vi farà bene in
Inghilterra, ma passato Dover,
la non val niente.
Dunque non è praticata fori in
altri paesi?
Signor no ...*

What thinke you of this English
tongue, tel me, I pray you?
It is a language that wyl do you
good in England, but passe Dover,
it is woorth nothing.
Is it not then used in other
countreyes?
No sir ...

For our modern world in which English has so pervasively colonized the globe it is increasingly difficult to imagine a moment when this was anything but the case. The Italian philologist and former minister of education, Tullio De Mauro, has suggested about the recent intrusion of English into the Italian lexicon that “now and again I would so like to hear . . . that Italian has ‘invaded’ the English language.”²⁶ In the second half of the sixteenth century it had, at least at the level of elite culture, though the proverbial English aversion to foreign languages is perfectly caricatured in that period by Florio in *Firste Fruites* 27 [51r]:

*Pochi di questi Inglesi si diletmano
di far imparar lingue ai figlioli, la
qual cosa mi dispiace. Io quando
arrivai in Londra, non sapendo
parlar Inglese, scontrai piu di
cinque cento persone, inanzi che
io sapessi trovar uno, che mi
sapesse dire in Italiano o
Franzese, dove stava la Posta.
E che cosa voresti che loro
facessero? Imparare lingue?
Signor, si, & alenare i loro figlioli
bene, & insegnarli a leggere,
scrivere, & parlar diverse
lingue ...*

Few of these Englishmen delight to
have their chyldren learne divers
languages, which thing displeaseth
me. When I arrived first in London,
I coulde not speake Englishe, and
I met above five hundred persons,
afore I coulde finde one, that could
tel me in Italian, or French, where
the Post dwelt.
And what would you have them
doo? learne languages?
Yea sir, and bring up their children
well, and have them taught to
reade, write, and speake divers
languages ...

The distance between popular English resentment of what were considered to be alien interlopers and the distinctly Italianate culture of the Elizabethan court and its circles delineates a space within which to locate Florio’s work and its relation both to the foreign community of which he

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was a part and the privileged Elizabethan world to which he aspired but would reach only as it was passing into history with the accession of the first Stuart king. A number of terms or concepts can be employed to describe such a space, and this project is an attempt to tease out as wide a range of them as might render the Italian encounter with Tudor England intelligible.

Italy's rich cultural tradition remained unanchored in the cinquecento by any stable unifying political force, a fact of tremendous importance for the circulation of Italian culture in England in this period. Florio promoted a cultural system that in traveling beyond the Italian peninsula achieved a degree of coherence which it did not entirely enjoy on its native soil through its translation into a radically different political context via the mediating continental Protestant culture he brought with him to England. The prominence accorded Italian vernacular culture by the Elizabethan elite called attention to the inadequacy of the English language and its literary culture, but the valorization of Italian models (among others) also, paradoxically, contributed to the process through which England expanded its linguistic, cultural, and political scope. The Italianate Englishman perhaps initially felt that he had been:

born into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game . . . worried that the process of socialization which turned him into a human being by giving him a language may have given him the wrong language, and so turned him into the wrong kind of human being.²⁷

Through the appropriation of other languages and their cultures, England tacitly acknowledged the scarcity of its own cultural capital but in so doing enabled the appropriating mechanisms that would provide one among the many diverse factors that came to advance its growing sense of a "national" character and facilitate its global ambitions.

The idea of Italy – an idea that has continued to exercise a powerful hold on the English imagination – took on a life of its own during the years that Elizabeth I occupied the English throne. This process occurred through the agency of members of an actual community, but its result was a fictive specter of political and cultural authority that contributed to the legitimizing rationale for English imperialist ideology. Florio's first published translation, *A shorte and briefe narration of the two navigations and discoveries to the northwest partes called Newe Fraunce* (1580), was of Jacques Cartier's account of his first two voyages to the New World (translated from Ramusio's Italian translation of Cartier's French text). Though possibly commissioned by Richard Hakluyt – it was later included in his great collection of colonizing narratives, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries* (1589) – Florio first had the work published

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himself, prefacing it with what Yates describes as one of the earliest summonses to would-be colonizers written in English:

Here is the description of a country no less fruitful and pleasant in all respects than is England, France, or Germany, the people though simple and rude in manners, and destitute of the knowledge of God or any good laws, yet of nature gentle and tractable, and most apt to receive the Christian religion, and to subject themselves to some good government . . . al which opportunities besides many others might suffice to induce our Englishmen, not only to fall to some traffic with the inhabitants, but also to plant a colony in some convenient place, and so to possess the country without the gansaying of any man.²⁸

Besides its obvious meaning, this exhortation can also be read as registering what in fact was already happening in England, as its dominant culture absorbed – even as they were passing out of fashion in Italy – the axiomatic Renaissance Italian lessons of *sprezzatura*, *virtù*, and *petrarchismo* to which Florio and the other purveyors of Italian culture in England afforded them access.²⁹

The introduction into the English monarchy of “stranger” elements with the translation of James VI into James I in 1603 – a Scots king with a marked francophone tilt inherited from his mother, possessed of formidable theological and humanist learning (he was skilled equally in Greek and Latin), and married to a Danish consort – effectively rewrote the coordinates of the Italian encounter with early modern England. Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s *Essais* was prepared in the waning years of the Elizabethan era, but the elaborate encomiastic apparatus of its first edition was clearly directed at the incipient Stuart age, published as it was early in 1603, just as Elizabeth I was dying. The transition from the Tudor to the Stuart periods was thus marked for Florio by a conspicuous turn not only from Italian to French, but more significantly by the practice of translation into English on a large scale, a maneuver that to a very great extent rendered mute his original advocacy of learning foreign tongues in order to negotiate the cultures they represented. The distinctiveness of the early Stuart era in relation to the period immediately preceding it is, consequently, best considered on its own terms, and I intend to return to the later period of Florio’s career in a separate volume that will deal with the diminishing prospects in the Jacobean world for the particular form of cultural arbitration Florio had earlier performed so singularly in Elizabethan England.³⁰

It should be understood from the outset that this is a study of the circulation of Italians, their language, and culture in Tudor England and does not seek, except tangentially, to tell the story of the English in Italy in this period. I am likewise unconcerned here with the question of Shakespeare and his Italian sources, though a scene from *Henry V* does

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come into consideration in the conclusion to “Language lessons” (Ch. 4), where the issue of linguistic difference in England is addressed.³¹ And while it is abundantly clear that other vernacular cultures in England played similar roles to what is examined here with regard to Italian, it would be far outside the scope of this project (and my expertise) to deal with this analogous history in detail.

In this study otherwise focused on the figural senses of translation in the Tudor period – those represented by the first part of Florio’s definition of the term – a word is in order regarding the considerable amount of translated material to be found in these pages. It has been one of my objectives throughout this project to bring together in one place, and in English, a variety of primary texts written in Italian and neo-Latin as well as critical literature written in Italian hitherto largely unregistered by English-language scholarship. But given the enormous differences in emphasis and style between (to take three disparate examples) a humanist and papal diplomat such as Francesco Chiericati (Ch. 1, pages 56–58), a literate merchant the likes of Alessandro Magno (Ch. 3, pages 118–122), and the modest literary talent that was Petruccio Ubaldini (Ch. 2, pages 72–84 and Ch. 3, pages 127–128), my approach has been to aim for legibility while reproducing in English as much of the particular flavor of a given author’s language as possible, even if the result is not always an especially lovely one. I have made my own interpolations only when the sense of a passage might otherwise be unclear, as I have done for instance in several places with the magnificently excessive letter that Pietro Aretino addressed to Henry VIII in dedicating the second volume of his collected letters to the English king in 1542 (Ch. 2, pages 68–69), and in the loopy epithalamium by Giovanni Alberto Albicante celebrating the 1554 marriage of Mary Tudor and Philip II of Spain (Ch. 2, pages 109–112).³²

The questions addressed in this book necessarily cut across disciplinary and linguistic boundaries, but the task of negotiating between Italian, neo-Latin, and English has been further complicated by the hostilities which tenaciously persist between scholarly disciplines even more than half a century after the comparative critical innovations of Aby Warburg, Frances Yates, and Erich Auerbach paved the way for new ways of thinking about the inter-connectedness of disparate modes of cultural representation.³³ Though the most recent English-language scholarship dealing with early modern England is widely known in Italy (in part thanks to a booming translation industry), it is not so widely imitated there, for the great majority of Italians who study the same material as their native-English-speaking colleagues do so from within a tradition considerably more grounded in “old” history, philology, and close reading. The little substantive exchange thus generated across language differences within the same field is multiplied

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exponentially when we move from the English situation in the period under consideration to contemporary Italian culture and its political coordinates. *La questione della lingua* [the language question] in early modern Italy, to which I devote the initial section of “Worlds of Words” (Ch. 4), has been largely ignored in estimations of the significance of Florio’s dictionary. This has been as true of Anglicists who have failed to address the *questione* – such a debate about the specific character of a “national” language never having occurred in quite the same way in English – as it has been of Italianists, reluctant to recognize that a “virtual” Italian could have produced a vocabulary at the end of the sixteenth century in a context far from the Italian peninsula which might have something consequential to say about the contentious native debate over the Italian language.³⁴

The very real cultural divides which work against a more truly comparative cultural and intellectual history are represented no more clearly in present-day Italy than in its libraries. Though they hold the greatest collections of manuscripts and early books anywhere in the world, there is no single Italian library that can lay claim to the breadth of the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Library of Congress, the German state libraries, or a number of American and British university libraries.³⁵ The actual condition of many Italian libraries and archives is increasingly alarming – drastically reduced allocations and shrinking staffs effect a deficit that encompasses preservation, acquisition, and consultation – a situation caused not only by the complex demands of maintaining existing collections, but also by the budgetary neglect of recent leftist governments and the outright hostility of the current rightist administration preoccupied more with American business models than with constructively confronting the massive crisis facing all of Italy’s cultural institutions. Completing a book of this sort while living in Italy as an unaffiliated independent scholar has consequently posed a sometimes daunting series of challenges, and whatever gaps there might be in my bibliography are to some extent due to these difficulties.

The multiplicity of approaches in literary and historical scholarship today is both a blessing and a curse. My own working methodology is an unapologetically heterogeneous one, assuming that all serious criticism has something potentially useful to bring to the table and that no single critical approach should be considered definitive in itself or necessarily prescriptive of other points of view. Disciplinary boundaries between history and literature, to say nothing of the sub-divisions which have emerged within these fields, had not yet been fixed in the sixteenth century, and I am convinced that the assertion of disciplinary prerogatives – themselves historically conditioned – hinders more than it helps to promote understanding of a period as complex and in so many respects distant from our own concerns as was the time circumscribed by the terms