

BOOK REVIEW

English Translation and Classical Reception: Towards a New Literary History. By Stuart GILLESPIE. *Classical Receptions*. Chichester and Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. x + 208. Hardcover, £70.00/\$110.95. ISBN 978-1-4051-9901-8.

In October of 1816, after an evening spent reading the *Iliad* with a friend, John Keats wrote one of English literature's most famous sonnets, *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*. Within it he describes the powerful emotional epiphany of experiencing that immortal Greek epic, but Keats also explicitly refers to Homer mediated through George Chapman's monumental English translation of 1616: "Yet did I never breathe its pure serene / Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold" (ll. 7-8). Embedded in the heart of the sonnet is not only the acknowledgment of the existence of classical translation, but also the praise of its literary effect and influence. It is an influence that has been all too frequently been forgotten or ignored in the study of both Classics and English; the result is a grave lapse in scholarship that Stuart Gillespie is determined first to highlight and then to rectify in his new book.

I begin with a caveat: This book is not a literary history per se, and Gillespie specifically notes this. The title is *Towards a New Literary History*, and that is the core of the book: the passionate presentation of—in fact, defense of—translation as a vital part of English literary history. He then bolsters this with the robust advocacy of a new assessment of that history and of what effects it has had and still has on the study of Classics and English both separately and together. In an academic world that too often both overspecializes and overcompartmentalizes, Gillespie's cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach is a breath of fresh air. When he asks, "How does English literature look after classical translation is accorded its due in the record?" (181), he is actually prefacing his grand argument that such translation is central to the English literary canon.

The book is not organized as a seamless comprehensive history, though Chapter 1, "Making the Classics Belong: A Historical Introduction," gives useful general context and presents with broad historical brushstrokes the phenomenon of translation between Classics and English. The rest of the book follows as a

collection of what might be best called case studies of items plucked from various points in English literary history and here organized chronologically from the English Renaissance to the twentieth century. The chapters' case studies range far and wide from widely recognized literary achievements such as Chapter 5, "Transformative Translation: Dryden's Horatian Ode," to writings forgotten today as in the case of Chapter 9, "Receiving Wordsworth, Receiving Juvenal: Wordsworth's Suppressed Eighth Satire." Out of the chapters, Chapter 2, "Creative Translation," and Chapter 7, "Classical Translation and the Formation of the English Literary Canon," together form perhaps the clearest distillation of Gillespie's overall argument of the vitality of classical translation in English. The examination of canon formation is particularly noteworthy as it reminds us how very many canonical English writers were also subtle, gifted translators and vice versa, including luminaries like Marlowe, Jonson, Dryden, Pope, Shelley, Browning, Pound, and Housman. On the other hand, the chapter that might break the most ground is Chapter 8, "Evidence for an Alternative History: Manuscript Translations of the Long Eighteenth Century," with its intriguing presentation of classical translations undertaken by enthusiasts who never intended their work for publication and public consumption. This much broadens the discussion of the widespread appeal of classics and translation in the 1700s, as well as sheds a fascinating light on the many forms of literary circulation of the day.

Overall as a collection, the book can seem occasionally desultory and impressionistic. This is doubtless a function of the disparate foci of the individual case studies, but I occasionally found myself wondering about the historical and literary gaps that exist, for instance, between Chapter 4's Shakespeare and Chapter 5's Dryden. If the chapters were screenshots taken from a film, one wonders about the film as a whole, regardless of—and perhaps even because of—how interesting the individual screenshots are in themselves. This effect may, however, be part of the point of the book as a whole. It means to be provocative in the best sense of the word; beyond presenting information, it piques the interest and stirs the desire to learn more. Gillespie's undeniable command of the material on display also hints intriguingly at what has not been included.

Taken together, the various case studies of the book express an energetic engagement with the rich inheritance of classical literature and its complex role in and through English translation. In this vein, the most enlightening aspect that Gillespie highlights may not be translation as a means to introduce classics to readers who do not command Greek and Latin or the conduit through which English writers explored classical literary forms and genres to make such things

their own. Instead, it may be about translation's invigorating effect that motivated English writers not only to incorporate and interpret the classics, but also to innovate and create works of their own that have added to the rich texture of Anglophone literature. One need only think, for instance, of Shakespeare, whose engagement with Plutarch, Plautus, and Ovid in and out of translation proved so fruitful. Gillespie is absolutely right when he insists that the disciplines of Classics and English have much to learn from each other and that it could (and should) be a most productive collaboration.

Overall, Gillespie challenges the conventional wisdom and status quo of studies in English literary history, and he makes his case with energy and flair. His ultimate achievement, though, is even more stimulating. If Gillespie's true goal is to encourage his audience to pursue further studies of translation in the ancient and English literary canons, then he has succeeded. By the time they reach the end of the book, readers will not only be surprised and intrigued by the scope of the material presented but also spurred on by the sense of discovery, of a brave new world opening and waiting to be explored. Indeed, thanks to Gillespie's efforts, we may even feel, as Keats did after reading Chapman's Homer (ll. 11–14):

like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

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