

BOOK REVIEW

Piecing Together the Fragments: Translating Classical Verse, Creating Contemporary Poetry. By JOSEPHINE BALMER. Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 271. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-958509-0.

Josephine Balmer, classicist, translator, and poet, has written a book explicating and exploring translation, translation theory, and the creativity necessary to translate poetry, especially poetry fragments, from antiquity. As a poet, she demonstrates how the creativity needed for translation can lead to a process by which original poetry takes shape based on classical sources. As a classicist, she demonstrates how research plays an integral role in both translation and creation. The book convinces that translation should be considered as its own field of study, blending the scholarly and the creative.

The book has four parts, each part containing two or three chapters. Part One is a detailed historical overview of translation and translation theory from antiquity to the present, especially concentrating on translator statements. Balmer argues that translator statements should be considered in their own right, not only as creative writing, but also as personal, autobiographical statements revealing the translators' inner conflicts. Far from being a dry cataloguing of translators and theories, Part One is instructive and entertaining, since Balmer has selected quotes from translators ancient and modern that at once reveal their theories and their personalities. This section shows what a contentious endeavour translation can be as witnessed by the harsh criticism translators have received since the earliest times.

In Part Two, Balmer moves into the specifics of translation, enumerating the difficulties and rewards that come from the translation of poetry from classical and dead languages, using her own experience in translating Sappho and other women poets. She details both her methods and her thought process, giving readers a glimpse into the multiple decisions required at each step of the process, demonstrating that translation is a hermeneutic activity, especially when dealing with poetry fragments. In so doing, she places herself into the context of translators who have gone before, both engaging and rejecting their theories, while explaining her reasoning.

In Part Three, Balmer highlights the creative leaps that the poet/translator must make, especially with poem fragments, decisions which utilize original and existing research and her own experience as both evidence and example. She shows how her interest in the voice of the poet led her to translate male poets, especially Catullus and Ovid, and the particular challenges that come from being a woman translator of male poetry. She opines that crossgender translation can aid a poet to rethink assumptions about poetry written by the opposite sex.

In Part Four, Balmer illustrates how the process of translation can lead the translator to rethink the works of antiquity in such a way as to inspire original poetry, poetry which becomes an outlet for biography, allowing an author to experience cathartic writing based on and through ancient texts, texts which express similar and universal human experiences of loss and grief. Included examples of her own finely crafted poetry validate her claims. In the movement from Part One to Four, the book becomes increasingly personal; Parts Three and Four could be considered a type of literary biography following the intellectual and emotional growth in a scholar/poet as shown through a life's work as a translator. Balmer writes in her concluding chapter, ". . . the singular issues of translating classical texts—fragmented, disputed, uncertain—can, of necessity, lead to creative strategies and solutions on the part of their translators which, in turn, can then overlap and interact with those of creative versioning and poetry" (229-30).

This is an important book which establishes translation as a unique field of literary work, a work that combines learning, judgment, and creativity. There is overlap between the Four Parts, with Part One being the most useful to the general academic population, or anyone interested in field of translation. Parts Two, Three, and Four will be of lesser interest and perhaps a bit tedious to those who do not have a personal interest in the translation of poetry, but will engage those who enjoy reading about the process of academic discovery. Part Four could stand alone as a separate work, one which might be of use to poets, encouraging them to look to the past to find inspiration for writing poetry which speaks to and grapples with the big questions which are universal through time and culture.

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