

Reviews



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Massimiliano Morini. *Theatre Translation: Theory and Practice*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. 166. ISBN: 978-1-3501-9562-2 (hardcover).

After four decades of diverse but rather tentative theorisations of the ancient craft of theatre translation, Massimiliano Morini's monograph provides a timely and comprehensive chronological account of all significant contributions to the relatively recent field of Theatrical Translation Studies and proposes a "unifying methodology," together with "its attendant terminology" (4), for the study of theatre translation, ostensibly as product, regarded as a "target theatre act" (65), but implicitly also as process, viewed as a complex, collaborative set of transformative operations. Although theatre translation today is far from being a "neglected area of . . . research" or the "poor relation" in Translation Studies, as Susan Bassnett deemed it in 1998 (90, 107), and similar book-length attempts at systematic theorisation and exploration have been made by translation scholars, translators and theatre professionals – mainly in the form of essay collections, such as Ortrun Zuber's *The Languages of Theatre: Problems in the Translation and Transposition of Drama* (1980) and *Page to Stage: Theatre as Translation* (1984), Carole-Anne Upton's *Moving Target: Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation* (2000), Roger Baines, Cristina Marinetti and Manuela Perteghella's *Staging and Performing Translation: Text and Theatre Practice* (2011), Silvia Bigliazzi, Paola Ambrosi and Peter Kofler's *Theatre Translation in Performance* (2013) or Katja Krebs's *Translation and Adaptation in Theatre and Film* (2014) and thematic issues of specialised journals, such as *Theatre Journal* (vol. 59/no. 3/Oct. 2007) or

Target (vol. 25/issue 3/2013: *Translation in the Theatre*, edited by Cristina Marinetti) – Morini’s book is the first metatheoretical survey of the most relevant perspectives that have shaped the current state of the art in Theatrical Translation Studies. Also, while prior monographs on the subject have focused either on the practice of theatre translation – discussing different approaches to the task of translating for the stage (e.g. Gunilla Anderman’s *Europe on Stage: Translation and Theatre*, 2005) or describing the process from the translator’s point of view (e.g. Phyllis Zatlin’s *Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation: A Practitioner’s View*, 2005) – or on some theoretical models and concepts developed by theatre theorists (e.g. Patrice Pavis’ notion of “intercultural theatre”), with a view to formulating more inclusive, performance-centric definitions of theatre translation (e.g. Sirkku Aaltonen’s *Time-Sharing on Stage: Drama Translation in Theatre and Society*, 2000), Morini’s stance is that of a detached scholar chronicling the evolution of theatrical translation theory from the textual bias of 20th-century descriptions to the performative views that dominate current research in the field.

The study is structured into three parts – “Part I: Theory,” “Part II: Terms and Methodology,” “Part III: Practice” – preceded by an Introduction, which announces the aim and delimits the scope of the monograph, and followed by a Conclusion, which acknowledges its limitations. The eight chapters that make up the body of this study are organised symmetrically, with each of the last three (practical) chapters illustrating the theoretical trends described in the first three (theoretical) chapters, and the two middle sections providing a brief overview of how contemporary theatre theory has influenced recent scholarship on drama translation (Chapter 4) and proposing a methodological model for the study of stage translation (Chapter 5), which is then applied in the analyses of Part III. Although the methodological section (Part II/Chapter 5) is posited as the centrepiece of the book – “an epistemological bridge” (4) between the theories reviewed in Part I and the practical application of the proposed model in Part III – and represents Morini’s original contribution to theatrical translation theory (which, by the author’s own admission, merely builds on

“what is already there”), the strength of this monograph lies in its condensed, but thorough recapitulation of “all significant historical views” (73) on theatre translation, tracing their progress from text-centric, source-oriented to increasingly performance-centric, target-oriented approaches. This tripartite structure aptly reflects the threefold aim of the study: 1) to take a diachronic look “at the panorama of theatrical translation theory through the ages and in the last six decades,” 2) to subsume all these approaches into a “single methodology” and 3) to apply “that methodology to the analysis of a variety of case studies” (133).

Thus, “Part I: Theory” begins with a summary of “two millennia of very sketchy and non-systematic thinking” (3) – from Roman times, when “translating was posited at the interface between creativity and imitation, and was always seen in performative terms” (12), through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when, under the influence of religious (in the former) and philological (in the latter) translations of the most painstaking kind, translation theory “became heavily text-centric and source-oriented” (14), emphasizing “textual fidelity rather than performative efficacy” (16), to the Romantic period, when the canonicity acquired by playwrights such as Shakespeare demanded both reverence for the genius of the original author and strict adherence to “the spirit and the letter” of the source text, despite the otherwise common practice of recreating plays through translations that “adapted their source texts to a new staging situation”:

On the one hand, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [Shakespeare] was performed all over Europe, quite often with remarkable disregard for the letter of his texts; . . . On the other hand, by the time Shakespeare’s plays travelled from one European country to another, both in book form and on stage, Shakespeare had already become the great northern Bard, and the object of a literary cult even outside Britain (Dobson 1992; Davidhazi 1993). Therefore, *performance-driven though many actual translations were, when translation theory busied itself with Shakespeare, it always did so in text-centric as well as strongly source-oriented terms.* (19; my emphasis)

This emphasis on the authority of the source text, Morini concludes, continued well into the twentieth century, even as translation theorists were beginning to acknowledge the importance of performance-related concepts such as “speakability” (Jiří Levý, 1969) and the need for various alterations and adjustments to the written text before a play is presented on stage (George Mounin, 1965): while admitting that there has to be a certain degree of freedom in the translation of a dramatic text for the stage, they ascribed this prerogative to the dramaturg or the director and perceived any “performance-driven transformation . . . as being outside the scope of translation” (23).

Chapter 2: “The age of Translation Studies: Early work on theatre translation” recounts the transition, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, from the “problem phase” of theatrical translation theory – when researchers within the Descriptive Translation Studies group, faced with the contradictions inherent in the very nature of drama as both literature and part of a performance, were trying to come up with solutions to various translation problems, from a theoretical position that still remained “halfway between text- and performance-centric” (33) – a stage best represented by Bassnett’s insightful articles on the subject, as well as by the collections of essays edited by Zuber in the early 1980s, to the more decisive attempts, in the late 1990s, at “studying theatre translation in performance-centric terms” (40) which, nevertheless, continued to use text-centric terminologies and focused on the “theatrical potential” of the text, rather than its realisation in performance through the complex transformative process of translation.

The third chapter is entirely devoted to examining the “decidedly performance-centric” (41) theories developed in the 21st century, starting with Aaltonen’s *Time-Sharing on Stage: Drama Translation in Theatre and Society* (2000) – hailed by Morini as “the first monograph to organise all past observations on the performative aspects of theatre translation into something approaching a coherent, fully inclusive theory” (42), despite its “slight theoretical and terminological uncertainties” (45) – then leaping forward to the 2010s, which saw the publication of two

stage-oriented collections of essays, both of which broke new ground within the ‘performative turn,’ focusing on theatrical practice and viewing theatre translation as a ‘total’ transformative experience, as well as a collaborative endeavour (Baines, Marinetti and Perteghella’s *Staging and Performing Translation: Text and Theatre Practice*, 2011), and even going so far as to uphold the autonomy of theatre translators as “target playwrights” (47) (Bigliazzi, Ambrosi and Kofler’s *Theatre Translation in Performance*, 2013). Morini concludes this chapter by returning, in the last section, to the first decade of the new millennium to explain and exemplify the “resistance of the (source) text” in many studies published in this period, which only attests to the “theoretical inconsistency” characterizing the “larger discipline of Translation Studies” (49). The example he gives of this backward-looking strand within 21st-century theatre translation theory is Zatlin’s monograph *Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation: A Practitioner’s View* (2005), which provides “a precious mine of information on the behaviour of professionals in this field” and proposes “a form of theatre translation that is based on ‘performability’”(50), but lags far behind the theoretical developments of the past three decades, the author’s “performance-driven” views being articulated “by means of text-centric, mostly source-bound theories” (50) and terminologies.

The last chapter of the theoretical part looks briefly at those ‘voices,’ views, ideas and opinions from within the field of Theatre Studies that have had a significant impact on the evolution of theatrical translation theory from textual to performative approaches, focusing particularly on theatre pragmatics and semiotics (Tadeusz Kowzan, Anne Ubersfeld, Pavis), two perspectives which, in the late 1970s and 1980s, afforded valuable insights that influenced the way in which translation scholars viewed drama and the task of translating plays for the stage. Of these, Pavis’ work on “intercultural theatre” (*Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, 1992) has probably been the most seminal. When the theatre scholar meets the translator and practical experience is brought to bear on theoretical reflection, the result is bound to be a complete, authoritative account of what theatre

translation entails: David Johnston's monograph *Translating the Theatre of the Spanish Golden Age* (2015) is "perhaps the most interesting" (61) of the recent contributions from within the field of Theatre Studies, as Morini reluctantly admits, while quibbling about its "theoretical uncertainty" and the subjectivity inherent in a translator's perspective.

Morini begins Part II: "Terms and Methodology"/Chapter 5: "Proposing a methodology for the study of theatre translation" by providing a broader definition of theatre translation as "the process whereby a source *theatre act* is transformed into a target *theatre act*" (67-68; my emphasis) in order to formulate a theoretical and methodological model that abandons the "traditional distinction between translation and adaptation . . . in favour of an all-encompassing view" (65) whereby all kinds of 'recreation,' 'rewriting,' 'remodelling,' 'refashioning' become part and parcel of the complex transformative process he calls "theatre translation," further redefined as "the recreation (any recreation) of a theatrical event in a different language, whether done with a strong emphasis on text or on performance. This recreation can happen on all textual and performative planes" (69). The model he proposes, therefore, is not just performance-centred, but also product-oriented (it is primarily concerned with the result, with the "target theatre act") and collaborative (it views the process as involving several levels of transformation and, implicitly, many participants):

in this field, it is often impossible to distinguish between the translator's (or translators') work and the contribution offered by other professionals with any clarity. . . . therefore, it is analytically sounder to look at finished products, at the evidence provided by the target theatre act.

. . . The end product belongs as much to the textual translator as it does to the directors, the actors and all the other participants in the transaction. (70-72)

The proposed methodology appropriates Roman Jakobson's well-known division of translation into three types – "interlingual," "intralingual," and "intersemiotic" – to which Morini adds a fourth

aspect (“intra-/intersemiotic”) to distinguish between the various operations whereby a “source theatre act” is turned into a “target theatre act.” The four aspects he includes in his description of theatre translation actually feature in many studies devoted to the topic, but scholars have normally used the terms “translation,” “adaptation,” “mise-en-scène”/ “production,” which, according to Morini, have created confusion and a “sense of despairing complexity” (72). His model, with its alternative terminology, is therefore meant to bring clarity to the theoretical debate and to dispel the anxiety often felt by researchers when faced with the task of analysing actual stage translations.

The case studies included in “Part III: Practice” are intended as illustrations of the proposed methodology, which is applied – in a chronological order that reflects the history of theatre translation theory recounted in Part I – to an account of the circulation of a Renaissance play (Giovanni Battista Guarini’s pastoral tragedy *Il pastor fido*, 1589) in seventeenth-century Europe (Chapter 6), to an analysis of two contemporary Italian productions of non-canonical twentieth-century texts (William Douglas Home’s play *The Secretary Bird* and Warren Adler’s novel-turned-into-a-film-and-later-into-a-play, *The War of the Roses*) (Chapter 7), and to a discussion of experimental theatre, in which he compares an American and a French production of Heiner Muller’s *Die Hamletmaschine* and analyses a multimedia show produced by a Catalan theatre company in 2016, which mixes “live performances, live filming and a pre-recorded soundtrack” (129), projected images and texts, languages and modes, involving all four aspects of theatre translation at once and foregrounding translation of all kinds in the very performance (Chapter 8). While the last two chapters clearly demonstrate why a text-centric approach to theatre translation is inadequate in the context of experimental, multimodal productions and that, even in the case of more conventional, text-based performances, “linguistic analysis is not enough to understand what happens in theatre translation” (130), Morini’s discussion of the successive English translations of *Il pastor fido*, and, to some extent, his analyses of *L’anatra all’arancia/The Secretary Bird* and *La Guerra dei Roses/The War of the Roses* are

more traditionally concerned with textual matters and focus mainly on the first two aspects of theatre translation (inter- and intralingual).

If, like Morini himself in some critical appraisals of previous scholarship on the subject, one were to pick holes in his book – leaving aside one’s mistrust of its methodological model’s claim to totality – one would point to the absence of the reception factor from his four-way definition of theatre translation, for not only is a theatre translation directed to and carried out, in every stage of the process, with a certain audience in mind, but it is the spectator who ultimately establishes the meaning of a performance, in an act of interpretation which, in line with Morini’s all-encompassing outlook, can also be regarded as a form of translation. Notwithstanding such reservations, one can hardly argue with the back cover endorsements, which justly commend Morini’s monograph as “a highly informative and reliable guide to the evolution of theatrical translation studies” (Elam, back cover) that will undoubtedly prove “helpful to students both of translation and of theatre” (Bassnett, back cover).

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Works Cited

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