
Guyda Armstrong’s *The English Boccaccio* is a splendid example of what can be done with the biography of a text or, in this case, of a corpus of texts. Tracing the history of Boccaccio’s major and minor works as they have appeared in English, this book focuses on the material presentation of editions of those works and, in a series of case studies ranging from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, uses them to illuminate the wonderful diversity of ways in which Boccaccio was received in English (and occasionally in and via other languages as well) over a period of some five hundred years.

The result is a rich and valuable book that will be of interest not only to specialists in Italian and English literature, but to anyone interested in theories of translation, authorship studies, and the reception of medieval literature in later periods. It strikes an exemplary balance among three approaches: detailed bibliographical description of the particular copies examined by Armstrong (always conscientiously laid out, even when not all the details will be relevant to her argument); meticulous analysis of the processes by which each text was translated and altered as it found its verbal and material form in the English version; and literary analysis of the ways in which these material and textual remediations of the subject matter might have impacted how successive generations of historical readers understood Boccaccio the author and his narrative. Armstrong always includes helpful English literal translations of the relevant Italian, Latin, French, and German passages that serve to make clear how diversely Boccaccio’s voice has sounded to his readers at various moments in history.

One of the important patterns emerging in this book is the way in which Boccaccio’s translators alternately follow paths of abridgement and amplification. Armstrong begins with the history of *De casibus virorum illustrium* in its late-medieval context, and in the French translation by Laurent de Premierfait the amplifications are particularly interesting, being almost in the nature of glosses on geography and culture. Here and in John Lydgate’s well-known *Fall of Princes* (an English version of Premierfait’s translation), Armstrong identifies a
tendency for the translation (the “target text”) to become the focal point, and for the source text to fade into the background, producing “translations that above all conform to the expectations of the receiving culture” (93). This emphasis on readerly expectations informs another of Armstrong’s fascinating examples: Henry Parker, Lord Morley’s 1543 partial translation of the *De claris mulieribus* as “Of the Ryghte Renoumyde Ladyes,” presented to Henry VIII – a “public event” and surprisingly a much nearer translation than that of the medieval translators (but one which relies on its inclusions and paratexts to get its admonitions about moral female behaviour across to that king).

In the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the expectations of the receiving culture begin to take on other recognisable patterns. In these centuries, Boccaccio is framed variously in the paratexts and translational choices of these books as an object of antiquarian interest, as a titillating writer of romance (the various textual strategies adopted by editors with regard to bawdy stories like the last tales of the third and ninth days of the *Decameron* are revealing), as a late-Victorian-era sentimental courtly lover, and as an author playing second fiddle to Dante and Chaucer in a developing field of English medieval literary study that sought to organise its heroes in hierarchies. Boccaccio even finds his niche as an early nineteenth-century serial writer, issued in parts by James Griffin in 1820-21.

Armstrong ends her study with the year 1930, after the recovery of Boccaccio’s “minor works” in English, and notes that there is still plenty of work to be done on the history of Boccaccio editions. This book, however, stands already as a very thorough account and as a model for future scholarship on the reception, remediation, and translation of medieval authors and texts.

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