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Review Essay: MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations

by Joshua Reid

Hadfield, Andrew and Neil Rhodes, Gen ed. *MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations*. 23 vols. London: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#) 2011-2017.

A sure sign of the health of a critical movement is in its representation of signature texts in scholarly editions. While articles and monographs provide the initial spade work, it is the editions that become the root system that secures criticism's gains and provides the textual fallow for future studies. Translation Studies in the English Renaissance is having such a moment. As detailed in my review essay in a previous issue of *The Spenser Review*, [\[1\]](#) significant critical works advancing the field are following in fast succession: reference works such as *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, databases such as *Renaissance Cultural Crossroads Catalog: An Analytical and Annotated Catalogue of Translations, 1473-1640*, edited collections like Fred Schurink's *Tudor Translation*, and important new monographs, such as A. E. B. Coldiron's game-changing *Printers without Borders: Translation and Textuality in the Renaissance*. These landmark texts have their worthy accompaniment in the Modern Humanities Research Association's excellent *MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations*, which publishes critical editions of pivotal translations to anchor our understanding of translation's importance to the English Renaissance and advance new scholarship in the area.

MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations is under the general editorship of Andrew Hadfield and Neil Rhodes. There are currently 23 volumes planned for the series, with plans to publish more. As of this review, the following eight volumes are currently in print:

Vol. 4. Ovid in English, 1480-1625. Part One: *Metamorphoses*. Edited by Sarah Annes Brown and Andrew Taylor.

Vol. 5. Humphrey Llwyd, *The Breviary of Britain* with selections from *The History of Cambria*. Edited by Philip Schwyzer.

Vol. 7. Gavin Douglas, *The Aeneid* (1513). Edited by Gordon Kendal.

Vol. 8. Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies. Edited by James Ker and Jessica Winston.

Vol. 9. English Renaissance Translation Theory. Edited by Neil Rhodes.

Vol. 10. James Mabbe, *The Spanish Bawd*. Edited by José María Pérez Fernández.

Vol. 11. Margaret Tyler, *Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood*. Edited by Joyce Boro.

Vol 17. Richard Carew, *The Examination of Men's Wits*. Edited by Rocío G. Sumillera.

This review will discuss the volumes in print and remark on the ones slated for future publication when relevant. A current list is available [here](#).

This series can be seen as the third incarnation of *Tudor Translations*—published in 1892-1909 (ed. W. E. Henley) and then in 1924-27 (ed. C. Whibley)—although this current version is a significant improvement over the first two. While the first two *Tudor Translations* were advertised for book collectors, including limited print runs, some on Japanese paper, this new series strives for ease of use

for both classroom and scholarship, with print-on-demand hardbacks and paperbacks as well as digital versions available on JSTOR. The addition of “Stuart” to the series title represents a dilation of coverage and focus beyond the original *Tudor Translations*. While *Tudor Translations* did move into the Stuart age on occasion, this series has more historical balance, covering texts as early as 1480 (Vol. 4) and as late as 1631 (Vol. 10).

The editions themselves are more varied in translator, genre, and source language, in effect expanding the translation canon and reflecting more accurately the “disorderly, heroic age” of English translation.^[2] Women translators are much better represented, including in Joyce Boro’s superb edition of Margaret Tyler’s *Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (Vol. 11), the earliest English romance by a woman author-translator. Planned volumes include a welcome edition of Lady Anne Cooke Bacon’s *An Apology or Answer in Defence of the Church of England* (Vol. 22) by Patricia Demers. In addition to the expected epic (Vol. 7) and classical tragedy (Vol. 8), we have less well-known chorography (Vol. 5) and medical texts (Vol. 17); the Latin and Greek classics are more evenly balanced by contemporary translations from French, Italian, and Spanish, including even translations from intermediary languages, such as Rocío G. Sumillera’s volume on Richard Carew’s *The Examination of Men’s Wits* (Vol. 17; Spanish -> Italian -> English). While a common practice at the time, intermediary translation may have been seen as less pure by the previous *Tudor Translations* editors.

Of the titles in print, it is nice to see Anglo-Spanish so well represented (Vols. 10, 11, and 17), about 38% of the current available volumes, which is a useful corrective to the traditional emphasis on translations from French and Italian. And the presence of Welsh (Vol. 5) and Scottish (Vol. 7) provides a more accurate sense of the diverse practice of translation in the British Isles. Schwyzer’s edition of Twyne’s translation of Llywd’s *The Breviary of Britain* and Llywd’s own translation of *Brut y Tywysogion* (Vol. 5) affords a fascinating glimpse into the understudied aspect of intra-insular translation.

The superiority of *MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations* will be most evident from the scholarly apparatus included with each volume. The previous *Tudor Translations* had excellent introductions, but here we have even more thorough introductions, not to mention footnotes, listings of variants from later editions, glossaries, bibliography, and indices—all that we have come to expect from a scholarly edition. The introductions in particular are superb, written by leading experts in the field, with the best serving as mini-monographs and important translation criticism in their own right, fully inflected by the latest developments in translation studies.

For example, Boro’s introduction to Tyler’s *Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (Vol. 11) provides illuminating insights into genre (romance), culture (Anglo-Spanish connections), religion (Catholic-Protestant frictions), and gendered authorship. The *Mirror* becomes a microcosm for the linguistic and cultural contact zones that the Early Modern translation project represents. Boro’s fascinating profile of Tyler includes an extended exploration into her translation methodology and her strategies of “metafiction and authorial self-justification” (31), where Boro demonstrates how Tyler’s preface and translation “successfully challenge masculine authorial traditions” as she recreates a male-authored source text (36). All of the introductions include important and often surprising perspectives about the translators and translation practices in the period, and they help show how these particular translations represent impact points in the literary polysystem.

While this scholarly armature that comes with the critical edition will be embraced by readers, the decision to modernize spelling and punctuation, as well as the decision not to print marginal

commentary in the placement as the original printed editions, will give pause to some. The first two series of *Tudor Translations* were verbatim (but not typographical) reprints and included the original text's marginal commentary, so in this sense are closer to the original printed incarnations. Translation studies, thanks to the work by scholars like A. E. B. Coldiron, is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of printing—of such features as typography and mise-en-page—as a form of translation and sign of embedded alterity.^[3] If printing is a “co-process of translation,” as Coldiron calls it, then it feels as if these editions are depriving the reader of a full sense of the process of “material-textual” Englishing.^[4]

The editions do not completely efface the material-textual traces of their source translations. Gordon Kendal's modernization of Gavin Douglas's Scottish in his edition of *The Aeneid* (Vol. 7) is intentionally light, striking a balance between accessibility and the text's original contours. Most archaic or obsolete words are retained in the editions if they appear as a headword in the OED, and a glossary is included for readers needing to parse those particular words. Most of the editors wisely decided to reprint their texts' prefaces and paratexts, including, in the case of Schwyzer's edition of *The Breviary of Britain* and *The History of Cambria* (Vol. 5), the original indices, which Schwyzer notes “are documents of considerable interest and value in themselves, pursuing and in many cases clarifying the scholarly and ideological agendas of the texts” (ix).

If editors deem a particular marginal comment from the original as important, they reproduce it in the footnotes. But marginal comments provide important shaping power in their original placements on the page (gnomic pointers, for example), and some translations, such as Sir John Harington's *Orlando Furioso*, seem inseparable from their commentaries. An example of potential loss is Sarah Annes Brown and Andrew Taylor's *Ovid in English, 1480-1625* (Vol. 4), where they choose to print Sandys's 1621 version of Jupiter and Callisto, which, as the earliest printing, may have been chosen so as to avoid the barnacled commentary of the 1632 edition. But it is Sandys's commentary and the moralizing tradition of Ovid that proves almost as influential as the translation itself. In addition, Brown and Taylor include images from Lodovico Dolce's *Le Trasformationi* (1553) and Joannes Sprengius's *Metamorphoses Ovidii* (1563) at the beginning of the selections and intra-text to illustrate their volume's Early Modern Ovidian fragments. These are pleasant, but anachronizing, touches, particularly in the case of Sandys, whose later editions also included fascinating engravings not reproduced here. The illustrations show the desire to produce a modern reader's edition rather than an accurate reproduction.

Hadfield and Rhodes fully understand the ramifications of their editorial decisions, and they make a convincing argument for those choices. Their stated goal is to produce accessible editions for both scholars and classrooms, following the modernizing practices of other scholarly editions of authors like Shakespeare, Middleton, and Jonson. In an explanation of the series' modernization policy, Rhodes wonders if the resistance against editorial massaging of the original translation might betray the assumption that “literary texts are modernized because they are intended to be read, and non-literary texts left in their original form because they are intended only to be researched.”^[5]

If correct, Rhodes shows how the perceived secondary status of translation maps onto editorial practice: translations are considered non-literary and therefore should remain un-modernized. *MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations* reminds us that editions are translations as well, and slavish fidelity to the copy text at the expense of accessibility to the target culture is folly, particularly in an EEBO-age. Hadfield and Rhodes, in fact, have encouraged readers and scholars to see the series as an accompaniment to the

EEBO text, as the copy texts for the editions are primarily from the EEBO versions, with some editions, like Rhodes's *English Renaissance Translation Theory* (Vol. 9), designed to be used in conjunction with EEBO if the reader wishes, as Rhodes includes STC numbers in the bibliography and EEBO image numbers in the commentary to facilitate comparative reading. This series is not meant to reproduce relics of the past, but rather to be put to use for study, instruction, and pleasure.

The benefits of this editorial preference for usability can be seen in the flagship volume of the series, and the one that will have the most wide-ranging impact in the field: Rhodes's *English Renaissance Translation Theory* (Vol. 9). While anthologies of translation theory—such as Douglas Robinson's *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche*—or anthologies of English Renaissance literary criticism—like Brian Vickers's *English Renaissance Literary Criticism*—contain generous excerpts on English translation, there is nothing in print that equals the scale of Rhodes's edition. Rhodes has provided a tremendous service for scholars of translation theory and Early Modern literary theory in general by mining the ore from 56 translation paratexts by 50 translators and writers on translation.

He divides the entries into three categories: "Translating the Word of God," "Literary Translation," and "Translation in the Academy." Each category is organized chronologically, with entries ranging from Caxton (1473) to Webbe (1622) covering the entire breadth of this pivotal translation era. Familiar figures are slotted next to less familiar ones, and by placing them in their particular theoretical translation frame—religious, literary, academic—Rhodes has permitted the texts and their theories to argue with one another, which contributes to the sense of a vibrant debate about translation and its uses. Rhodes's introduction to the volume is the perfect primer for the debate: he weaves the different translator-theorists together as he explores their points of contention about issues like fidelity to the source text, where ultimately English translation shows its "characteristic ... preference for the middle way" (30). The end result is the most comprehensive anthology of English Renaissance Translation Theory that has ever been printed, and it will be a trusted companion text for generations of future scholars.

The strength of Rhodes's anthology format is productively realized in many other current and planned volumes. Brown and Taylor's *Ovid in English, 1480-1625* (Vol. 4) usefully demonstrates the sweep of Ovid's influences through the editors' choice to reproduce, in true Ovidian fashion, story fragments excerpted from the translations, which is how Ovid was processed by Early Modern authors, emblematisers, and adaptors. The approach also gives Golding and Sandys equal footing with less well-known Ovidian translators such as Barksted and Gresham. A. E. B. Coldiron's forthcoming *Christine de Pizan in English Print, 1478-1549* (Vol. 6) will include five Tudor translations of de Pizan, exploring her enduring influence on the period. Hannibal Hamlin's *The Psalms in English, 1530-1633* (Vol. 19) will be an important contribution to psalm translation by one of the current experts, and it will include printed and manuscript psalms in prose and verse. My own forthcoming edition, *The Italian Romance Epic in English: 1590-1600* (Vol. 23), seeks to adapt the dual-language format of modern translations to create a "dual-translation" format, where Richard Carew's translation of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* can be compared side by side with the same stanzas from Edward Fairfax, and Robert Tofte's fragments from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* will appear alongside Sir John Harington's stanzas from the same cantos.

It is important to note that even in these anthology formats, the individual translators are given their due: James Ker and Jessica Winston's *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies* (Vol. 8) helps rectify the

totalizing influence of Thomas Newton's *Seneca: His Tenne Tragedies* (1581), which grouped the disparate translators together into a Seneca "project" (3). The second series of the *Tudor Translations* printed Newton's version, with an introduction by T. S. Eliot.^[6] Ker and Winston, in contrast, un-anthologize three of the plays so as to anthologize them anew, this time making sure to provide the necessary distinctions for each translation event.

Each of the previous *Tudor Translations* moved forward the study of Early Modern translation and its permeation of the polysystem of literary criticism. Riding the momentum from the first series, Charles Whibley—who wrote some introductions for *Tudor Translations*—wrote a chapter on "Translators" for the *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1909). Whibley would go on to edit the second series of *Tudor Translations*. And when F. O. Matthiessen published the most influential book on English Renaissance translation in the 20th century, *Translation: An Elizabethan Art* (1931), he cited Whibley's entry in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* and the introductions to both series of *Tudor Translations* as the "stimulus" for the book.

Time will tell whether *MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations* will prove as influential, even though these editions far exceed the scholarly accomplishment of their predecessors. This series faces challenges that the previous two did not: EEBO and the digital humanities make a conventional printed edition, even one that has a presence on JSTOR, a risk. And the first two *Tudor Translations* did not exist in an age of critical deconstruction of the very nature of the scholarly edition itself, when scholars like Randall McLeod un-edit critical editions to show how they transform the texts as they transmit them.

McLeod coined the term "transformission" for this process, but another way to describe an edition's interpretive transformation is to call it a translation. Perhaps one way to look at *MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations* is as a project of scholarly translation perfectly timed and tailored for the needs of its target culture: researchers and students wanting to understand how Early Modern translation shaped literature and culture. If translation was the "means by which the Renaissance came to England," as Matthiessen put it memorably, then *MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations* is the means by which the appreciation and understanding of Early Modern English translation will come to the twenty-first century.

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[1] See Joshua Reid, "[The Enchantments of Circe: Translation Studies and the English Renaissance](#)," *Spenser Review* 44.1.6 (Spring-Summer 2014).

[2] "Disorderly heroic age" quoted from Gordon Braden's "An Overview," in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, Volume 2: 1550-1660, 11.

[3] See Coldiron's *Printers without Borders: Translation and Textuality in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015).

[4] For printing as a "co-process of translation," see Coldiron's important reframing of translation studies in *Printers*, 1-7.

[5] Rhodes, "Modernization for the MHRA Tudor and Stuart Translations" (paper presentation, Early Modern Exchanges Conference, University College London, September 16, 2011).

[6] Reprinted as "Seneca in English Translation" in *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1932), 51-90.