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The Italian Encounter with Tudor England: A Cultural
Politics of Translation (review)

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Comparative Drama, Volume 41, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 122-125 (Review)

Published by Western Michigan University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2007.0010>

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Henry VIII (1612?)—and find an intriguing theatrical mixture of Old Religion and New, showing how he was cunningly able to exploit both extremes, playing, as it were, with “young Charbon the puritan and old Poysam the papist” for their theatrical, if not their propagandist, impact.

The book’s great virtue is a buoyant enthusiasm—its accumulation of detail, obsessive looking for clues, seizing on unlikely possibilities, coincidences, and secret connections—so that whenever an R. L., a Will, or William Smith appears, an opportunity for “supposing” arises. Also admirable, or at least enviable, is its author’s confidence that the book will “overthrow the accepted version” and is “more far-reaching than previous claims” (xxiii, 138), involving a complete rethinking of the canon, including *The Faerie Queene* and *Arcadia*. Donne acknowledged that his alchemist might “by the way” on his futile quest produce something valuable and revivifying. McCarthy’s enthusiasm is admirable; like some detective novels, which is the author’s own comparison, her book was a fun read.

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Michael Wyatt. *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England: A Cultural Politics of Translation*. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xiii + 371. \$90.00.

Michael Wyatt’s fascinating new book is in some ways two: an account of the Italian presence in England during the sixteenth century, and an engaging study of John Florio, best known for his translation of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays*, but discussed here for his Italian grammar books and an Italian dictionary for his fellow Englishmen and women. And yet the two projects are clearly linked. For Wyatt is intent on identifying a surprisingly large number of Italians—the second-generation Florio among them—who played a formidable role in constructing a national identity for Tudor England. This is a group that includes Baldessar Castiglione, author of *The Courtier*; Pietro Torrigiano, who sculpted Henry VII’s tomb in Westminster Abbey; the reformers Cardinal Pole and Bernardo Ochino; and John or “Giovanni” Wolfe, the London publisher of Machiavelli and Pietro Aretino. There are also glassblowers, merchants (who congregated in the streets as though they were piazzas), and actors. But crucial to the construction of “England” was an emerging attraction to one Italian product in particular. This is not Italian glass or paradigms of courtly behavior, but

the Italian language, on which Florio capitalized in *Florio His Firste Fruites ... a perfect introduction to the Italian and English tongues* (1578), *Second Frutes* (1591), and *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598). Thus while the book's first two chapters discuss only occasional visitors to the pendant orb during the century's first half, the last three identify a more permanent community of Italians after 1550—educated Protestant emigrants who enjoyed a “privileged status” in a country “aggressively seeking to enter into an international community.” “Unlike Latin,” Wyatt argues, “Italian was particularly well-suited to enabling notions of national identity, being the language of a large population of culturally rich but politically impoverished peoples” (138–39). And given that “Italy's rich cultural tradition remained unanchored in the Cinquecento by any stable unifying political force” (7), that tradition could travel unfettered by accompanying baggage, ensuring its reception in a country hungry for sophistication.

Thus a partial answer to the question, why Italian? (A question we might ask today when there has been a breathtaking rise in the number of undergraduates taking language classes.) Then, as now, there were multiple reasons, and they surely did not all have to do with craving to find oneself beneath the Tuscan sun. Yet as the title suggests, Wyatt's book orients us not so much to England's fascination with Italy, but to the “Italian encounter with Tudor England.” We don't learn about Thomas Wyatt's engagement with Petrarch, Sidney's grand tour, or Shakespeare's wholesale pilfering of *Bandello* and *Cinzio*—even if we do hear about Roger Ascham's anti-Italian (read anti-Catholic) sentiments and Elizabeth I's love of foreign players. The real question is, why English?—and why did so many exiled reformers who wound up in England develop what Wyatt calls a “professional concern with language” (192)?

Florio's father was one such figure who fits this pattern. A Jew who converted to Catholicism, Michelangelo Florio came to embrace Reformist sentiments and sought safe harbor outside of Italy after 1540. His stint in England suggests that young John came by his interest in language instruction honestly: his father not only taught Italian but composed an innovative text for his students, *Regole dele lingua thoscana*. John, who seems not to have been as passionate a Protestant as his father, was thus part of a larger community “situated ... *in and between* both linguistic cultures” (181–82). Like the Italian horseman Pugliano to whom Sidney introduces us at the beginning of his *Defense*, Florio was also between classes: eager to please his aristocratic patrons, such as Southampton, he nonetheless reached out to an eclectic circle of readers—doctors, gentlemen, merchants, and even cooks, given his use of cookbooks as sources for language learning. His frequent reliance on “proverbial wisdom” shows him purposefully confusing class distinctions (183), an idiosyncratic feature in a language book claiming to convey the rules of courtesy. Most arresting is the sheer copiousness of

Florio's dictionary entries, an eclecticism that conforms neither to standards of linguistic propriety nor to the succinct, compressed exactitude we have come to expect from dictionaries. "Fantasma"—commonly translated as "ghost"—is "a ghost, a hag, a spirit, a hobgoblin, a robin-good-fellow. Also the night-mare or riding-hag." And the vaguely licentious "schifo": "Coy, quaint, nice, skittish, fond, peevish, puling, awkward or froward. Also queasie, nastie, lothsome, odious, to be shunned, eschewed or avoided, disdainfull" (243). The consequence of such *copia*, Wyatt suggests, is "an opening-up of the potential of language to represent a multitude, we might almost say an infinity, of possible significations"—partly the result of Florio's contacts with another Italian in England, Giordano Bruno, who dreamed of infinite universes and believed in the capacity of the Italian language to "reproduce the nature of things" (242).

This fascination with *copia* distinguishes Florio's definitions from those in the *Vocabolario della Crusca*, which would be published in Italy in 1612. For one thing, Florio simply had access to more books: Wyatt notes that of seventy-two works listed as sources for Florio's *Worlde of Words*, twenty-four of them were on the Index. Florio was also obviously independent from the Medicean ideology and "conservative linguistic politics" (243) that guided the Accademia della Crusca. Most of the texts cited in the Crusca's *Vocabolario* were canonical works of Florence's past, while Florio's wide-ranging lexicon included words from the scurrilous Aretino and the maligned Machiavelli, and he was not above explaining a bawdy term or two to his women readers. It is intriguing to think that the scene in *Henry V* when the French princess Kate begins to learn English with her nurse originated in language manuals like Florio's, published only a few months before *Henry V*; Wyatt nicely remarks that Kate, "in advance of her compatriots, confronts the reality of their defeat and moves on, doing what she must to accommodate herself to what inevitably promise to be her new circumstances" (201). At the same time, the detour Wyatt takes to detail for us bawdy terms and his focus toward the end of his book on the gender-based nature of certain words (and of "parole" in general) look more toward *Queen Anna's New World of Words* of 1611 than back to Tudor England. And—not such a bad thing—he leaves at least one question lingering when this book is done.

For what do Florio's translations and the process of language learning he advocated—which at least to a modern reader who has perhaps read one too many boring language manuals from the twentieth century seem remarkably creative, innovative, and just plain fun—say about, well, the English language in the Renaissance and Florio's experiences as an Englishman (Wyatt mentions that Florio never set foot in his parents' native land)? One is prepared to accept the argument that the Italian language assumed a different character in England, for which Wyatt comes up with largely sociological explanations: the

availability of books in England that were censored on the Continent, English tolerance of religious difference, the presence of that great queen Elizabeth, whose “linguistic skills” were “the outward sign of her singular constellation of qualities” and whose capacious learning drew the admiration of, among others, Bruno (244). Yet one wonders whether in the nuanced, complex process of translation there is not something else at work as well. Even though Wyatt remarks on the “scarcity” of a national culture in England, the second half of the sixteenth century was extraordinarily rich for the formation of English as a literary language, as Paula Blank has argued. One Alessandro Citolini would write—while in England—that with the Italian language one can speak of “divinity,” as well as “of stones, trees, herbs, metals; of beasts, and of man; of economics, politics, war, peace, and life” (207). Could not the same statement be applied to the English language of the 1570s and 1580s itemized in Florio’s dictionary entries and in his lively dialogues in *First Fruites*, where the dry “Vi piacciono le Comedie a’ voi” becomes the lilting “Do Comedies like you wel?”

The book proceeds largely through vignettes: Italian accounts of Mary’s reign and Thomas More’s execution, the publisher Wolfe’s rehabilitation of Machiavelli, a Protestant treatise called *Satan’s Stratagems* by the English Italian Giacomo Aconcio, Italian defenses of a vernacular that had only recently flexed its muscles with respect to Latin, like Citolini’s *Lettera in difesa de la volgar lingua*. In many ways, *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England* is as copious as an entry in Florio’s *World of Words*. From this wealth of material, we both come to understand more precisely a particular moment in England’s cultural history and are moved to ask about the specificities of an English language into which Florio and a host of other Italians translated if not their native tongues, at least that of their parents. While Wyatt promises a sequel in the form of Florio’s, and England’s, turn to French in the seventeenth century—the notable Montaigne translation, among other works—one might imagine a different kind of sequel about the fate of Florio’s works among his readers and the extent to which they may have shaped emerging attitudes about English.

Yet in moving us to ask such questions and to imagine such future books, Wyatt performs a real service as he encourages us to reflect on why translation and philology continue to matter as we think not only about our pasts, but about our present (on which see his outstanding introduction). This is comparative work at its best. And I look forward to the sequel, whatever shape it will take.

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