

Morini, Massimiliano (2022). *Theatre Translation: Theory and Practice*. London (United Kingdom): Bloomsbury, 166pp. £20.29. ISBN 9781350199255.

Morini's book is, true to its title, a detailed exploration of the theory and practice of translation for the theatre. Yet it does not begin with studies of the theatre, translation, or linguistics, but with an arresting and appropriately dramatic introduction to a science fiction short story, depicting a planet whose inhabitants experience a total eclipse every two thousand years. Each time, they respond in destructive madness, leaving little trace of their civilisation, so that, when the cycle is repeated, they are unable to benefit by learning from experience. Morini humorously but aptly suggests a parallel between this story and the work of chronicling the history of theatre translation, helping readers to appreciate the complexity of the task from which his study begins.

Before embarking on this challenge, he outlines the content of the study, which is elegantly structured to reflect the relationships between theory and practice in specialised translation for the theatre. It follows a pattern (also represented schematically on page 5) whereby each theoretical chapter has a corresponding practical chapter, with a central, pivotal chapter that bridges the two through attention to methodology. The book sets out to provide “a map and condensed history of what is already there” (4). Its prime target readers are those who are concerned with various approaches to the study of translation for the theatre, and who also both recognise and value the input of other essential agents of theatrical transmission, such as actors and producers. Its focus is on determining how far theatre translation depends on text, how far on performative factors.

Part I examines the evolution of theatre translation theory. The tracing of its history before the modern discipline of Translation Studies covers an impressive time span, and reflects a sound knowledge of other fields in which it is subsumed, such as religion, philosophy, and, especially, literature.

In his discussions of translation in the ancient world, from Greek to Roman cultures, Morini addresses its position “at the interface between creativity and imitation” (12). This applies not only in the context of the theatre, but wherever culture and literature are concerned. To highlight its performative aspects, the author looks at several examples of prominent playwrights who considered themselves translators, without viewing adaptation as contrary to originality or facing criticisms of appropriation, pointing readers to the differing perspectives in classical and modern times.

Another consistent feature Morini identifies in the way that theatre translation has been viewed and theorised is emphasis on the notion of theatre as a literary genre and playwrights as poets. This has led to a bias towards “textual fidelity” over “performative efficacy” (16), and a perception of the ideal translator as someone with similar literary ability to the original author. It has also prompted some scholars of translation theory to place the work of the “performance-driven transformation of theatrical writing” (23) — its transfer from page to stage — outside the scope of translation, and firmly within the remit of the dramaturg.

In a thorough survey of the more recent academic works on theatre translation that belong to the “age of Translation Studies” (25), Morini demonstrates the persistence of this same textual bias. He offers a detailed critique of Bassnett’s inceptive approach and its limitations, some of which he sees as the result of her attempts to take performance into account while working within the text-centred frameworks of the discipline. He goes on to analyse later works, beginning with those that respond to Bassnett’s call for closer collaboration between translation specialists and historians of the theatre. There is also consideration of some of the implications of developing technology, which leads to the idea of public performance as recordable, and therefore a potential resource for translators. While it is evident that scholars of theatre translation increasingly acknowledge the merits of transmitting the theatrical experience as a whole, some readers may be surprised that source-based, text-centred translation remains so dominant. That is why, at this juncture, Chapter 4, which introduces much less text-centric “voices from theatre studies,” acts as an effective and well-placed counterbalance.

As the author himself concedes, the study slants towards Western European (and [pan]-American) theatre translation, with little reference to Eastern Europe, Africa or Asia. This is predictable, even inevitable, since it is dictated by the history of theatre translation to date — the nature of what is already there. On the other hand, looking beyond this scope might well have been helpful to the discourse on less text-centric theatre. It could also have revealed the different outlook of cultures whose languages are less widely spoken or studied, and their heightened awareness of how important it is to ensure that audiences beyond the source culture understand what is happening in a theatrical performance.

Part II deals with defining theatre translation — something of particular consequence in a field so closely concerned with attributing meanings — and with presenting a methodology. While Morini’s titular term, ‘theatre translation,’ is not new, it is open to a variety of interpretations, and the author takes care to meet the expectations of readers within the discipline of Translation Studies by clarifying precisely how he will apply it. Morini draws on Jakobson’s tripartite definition of translation, showing why it is pertinent to recreating a theatrical event in another language, although not originally formulated for the study of theatre translation. He articulates the interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic levels of the process, and puts forward a case for extending the theory to include an additional, intrasemiotic level.

Morini asserts multiple times that his work is meant to act largely as a *Summa*, recapitulating existing research in the field, and, indeed, indicates some of the risks of trying to go beyond this. However, although the recapitulation is meticulous and very well informed, the book comes across as offering a good deal more. Above all, the case studies in Part III illustrate fascinating and quite different examples of theatre translation in action, each of them likely to present new perspectives to a segment of the readers.

First up is a historical example from the Renaissance theatre. Here, Morini looks at multiple versions of an Italian pastoral tragicomedy in other European languages, in a context when the reason for its translation was most often appreciation for its poetic qualities as a courtly classic, with the prospect of proving the translator’s suitability for

courtly office as an ulterior motive (80). While his overall conclusion is that “theatre translations [as opposed to literary or poetic ones] do not make it into print” (91), he shows convincingly, through close comparative analysis of source and target texts that did survive in written form, that some translators were beginning to consider the theatrical potential of their outputs. He also uncovers a unique instance of a theatrical translation in printed form. This chapter should be of particular interest to readers concerned with the dissemination of plays in Renaissance Europe and the related histories of printing and performance.

Next comes a fast forward to contemporary performance, where Morini shows that there is still a strong divide between text-based translations for publication and performance-based translations for practical use in the theatre. He analyses two contemporary Italian productions, each promoted as the translation of a play in English that is not especially well known, exposing ways in which they also derive from intermediate sources from other languages and media. In this chapter, he provides examples of all four of the levels of translation explained in Part II, paying close attention to where they occur covertly, because of a conflict between “text-centric ideologies” (109) and what actually happens on stage. The questions raised here will especially engage readers who wish to discover more about indirect derivations, the distinction between faithfulness to sources and a successful production, and how these affect the freedom of the various kinds of translators.

Morini’s final case studies, from contemporary experimental theatre, provide intriguing evidence of how text is not always paramount in theatre translation. Here we have the best opportunity to observe the effects of inter- and intra-semiotic translation on some productions that also come across as conspicuously international in character. In the English and French renditions of *Die Hamletmaschine* — itself a form of translation from Shakespeare’s original work (113-4) —, Morini shows the influence of different inter-semiotic choices on the productions in each target language. In his analysis of the multimedia production *Birdie*, he finds translation explicitly becoming part of the theatrical experience itself. These discussions are instructive not only for readers who wish to further their understanding of translation for experimental performances, but also for those working in other areas where linguistics and performance studies intersect, including the integration of sign language into theatrical performance, consecutive interpreting as a performative act, the use of surtitles in theatre and opera, and fan-subbing in anime.

This new study is of evident appeal to scholars of theatre and its translation, and will be illuminating for others in the discipline of Translation Studies. It works very well in its aim to bridge the theoretical and the practical dimensions of translating works for the theatre. It also has the clarity, accessibility, and meticulous attention to key details, to offer insights to scholars from outside the immediate field.

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