

Hassan Melehy. *The Poetics of Literary Transfer in Early Modern France and England*.

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With the hope of bringing to light “the historical dynamics that continue to make the literature of the past of value to the present” (10), Hassan Melehy examines the notion of literary transmission, and uses the concept of simulacrum (borrowed from Deleuze) to account for Du Bellay’s, Spenser’s, Montaigne’s, and Shakespeare’s complex attitudes regarding the myth of Rome, the Eternal City.

The book starts with Du Bellay, the author of *La Deffence, et Illustration de la Langue Françoise* (1549) who aimed at defending modernity and at giving the French tongue its nobility. For the French writer, the literary practice of imitation, derived from the medieval concept of *translatio studii*, was of prime importance to place old texts in new contexts and to fashion a new language. In studying *Les Antiquitez de Rome*, Melehy examines more specifically Du Bellay’s notion of imitation put forth in the *Deffence*. In some fascinating pages, he discusses the links between the *Antiquitez* and Roman tourist guidebooks such as Andrea Palladio’s *L’antichità di Roma* (1554). Paradoxically, it would seem that Du Bellay did his best to include the ruins of Rome in his sonnets only to reject any possibility of eternity, as if Rome could only survive in the imitative reworkings of French poetry.

After examining Du Bellay’s dream language through a psychoanalytically-inflected interpretation of his *Songe ou Vision sur le mesme subject* (1558) — an approach not fully convincing but justified on the grounds that psychoanalysis is “part of the legacy of the Renaissance” (56) — Melehy then focuses on the English translation of *Les Antiquitez de Rome* and the *Songe* published in Spenser’s *Complaints* (1591). While insisting on the Christian dimension of Spenser’s rewritings, he argues that the French sonnets were turned into ruins by Spenser, in his desire to create a style of modern poetry refashioning the English language. Particularly striking is Melehy’s incursion in Jan van der Noot’s *Theatre for Wordlings* (1568) in order to compare the way Spenser faithfully incorporated Du Bellay’s poetry in his sonnets with his later attempts to appropriate the poetry of his French predecessor, notably in his *Complaints*.

Part 3 focuses on Montaigne’s *Essais* — but surprisingly fails to consider the passages in his *Journal de voyage* where the mayor of Bordeaux meditates on the ruins of Rome — and starts with an assessment of “De l’institution des enfans,” an essay advocating judgments formed in the world through experience, before being

brought to bear on books. In many ways, Melehy explains, Montaigne breaks from the scholastic practice of quoting *auctoritas*, so that his Latin citations seem somewhat loosely related to the meanings they had in their original contexts. As a consequence, Montaigne refuses any good use of language for its own sake and emphasizes the continual transformations of the world. He engages in “traveling and writing, traveling as writing” (167), while visiting Rome in his writings, and refashioning Du Bellay in order to make Rome the means to explore his own self. This is particularly conspicuous in “De la vanité.”

The fourth and last part of the book addresses Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, notably because they incorporate Spenser’s *Ruines of Rome* in a sequence devoted to poetry and time. For Shakespeare, Rome is indeed closely connected with death and rebirth (Sonnet 55). If many of the sonnets emphasize the transformation that time produces as part and parcel of the functioning of poetry, others give credence to the idea of poetry as “life’s effective vehicle of resistance to time” (219). This balanced view leads Melehy to explore one Roman play in particular, *Julius Caesar*, in which Rome is represented as a place perpetually changing in time. Even though Melehy claims the importance of the “theatricalization of action” (222), he seems to regard Shakespeare as a writer more than as a playwright. Indeed, if Shakespeare’s works are aptly compared with other discursive practices of his fellow writers, Melehy’s analyses seem better suited to Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* than to plays like *The Tempest*, since the dramatic dimension is somehow ignored. *The Tempest* is indeed the last play analyzed in relation to Montaigne’s “Des cannibales.” Much of the last chapter therefore concentrates on Caliban as a liminal figure characterizing “print technology as bound up with the propagation of imperial culture” (250), and it is no real revelation to learn that Caliban’s name may be read as an anagrammatical distortion of the word “cannibal.”

If one may sometimes regret the constant use of the *OED* to the detriment of early modern dictionaries (even though Cotgrave’s *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* is sometimes quoted), Melehy’s contribution to intertextual studies devoted to the early modern era is a significant one. All in all, in spite of minor flaws, the volume is written in an elegant prose and is detail-oriented as well as erudite. It will assuredly be read with both pleasure and profit.

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