

**Angelica Duran, Islam Issa, Jonathan R. Olson, eds..** *Milton in Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 528 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-875482-4.

**Reviewed by** Rena Bood

**Published on** H-Nationalism (February, 2018)

**Commissioned by** Krisztina K. Lajosi-Moore (University of Amsterdam)

*Milton in Translation* (2017) offers an expansive and novel study of the global reach of John Milton through translations into twenty-three languages, bringing together a wealth of knowledge by a wide variety of specialists in their respective fields. Ranging from western Europe to Asia and the Americas, the volume strives to be as inclusive as possible. Given the rising interest in the combined approach of translation and literary studies, this volume demonstrates the potential fruitfulness of such research in both a historical and a more contemporary context. As outlined in the introduction, this collaborative effort focuses on “three key aspects of translation: its history, theory, and practice,” while also allowing for compact case studies (p. 5). The result is an academic work that has the potential to inspire scholars to pursue this line of research more fully.

The brevity of the volume also comes with a set of understandable restrictions. One result is that many of the studies included do not reach beyond a qualitative comparison of the original English works by Milton and the translated versions. There are of course exceptions, such as Bing Yan’s chapter on Milton in China, which not only reviews the existing translations but also shows the impact of Milton’s work and especially his name on Chinese culture. Likewise, David Robertson shows how the Finnish translation subtly reveals

the translator’s own experiences with a nation torn by civil war. Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen’s chapter on Milton in the Dutch Republic similarly provides a bird’s-eye view of how form is affected by contemporary popular culture and how content is mediated by the religion and politics of the time. However, the number of studies which do not go beyond concluding that “A” is different from “B” is roughly equal to those that dare to suggest possible reasons for these differences, be they cultural, political, or aesthetic in nature.

The question is: what do these differences tell us about the historical and cultural context of the production of the translation, and why does this matter? As Anne Lange astutely notes: “Given that translation reception is a web of different systems and traditions, the initial question in translation research is often *what* is being translated, whether it is the author, the text, or some of its qualities. Informed translators are usually well aware of their position in between the source and the target circumstances and of the fact that the addressees of the translation are different from those of the original” (p. 185). According to Van Dijkhuizen, translations provide an opportunity to “[shed] light on the act of reading in a way that is perhaps unique” (p. 170). By addressing these different systems and traditions, by considering the reasons behind the translation, it becomes possi-

ble to zoom in more accurately on historical circumstances that are otherwise not available to us. Those chapters of the volume that simply compare of the quality of the original and the translation(s), or merely survey the translations created from the first up until the present day, thereby not only leave the reader unsatisfied, but are also missing an important opportunity to explore the historical and cultural dimensions at the heart of the intersection between translation and literary studies.

To many scholars working on the intersection of (historical) literary studies and translation studies, it will seem impossible, and indeed absurd, to separate a translation from its historical and cultural context. As noted by Yolanda Rodríguez Pérez in a different study that combines translation studies with the study of imagological constructions in literature, “translations are not produced in a void, but in a continuum of textual and extra-textual constraints.”[1] She distinguishes between translations and “pseudo-translations,” a genre defined as an “attempt to match the existing images and expectations of their readers, while engaging with contemporary discourses,” of which there is a shining (though misclassified) example in *Milton in Translation*. Christophe Tournu’s chapter on French translations of Milton’s epic concludes with a case study of what I would call a pseudo-translation: Anne-Marie Du Bocage’s *Le Paradis terrestre* (1748). As Tournu notes, this work “cuts” large portions of the original *Paradise Lost* “to fit the expectations of French readers” (p. 153) and to “reflect French taste” (p. 156). Tournu writes that “[Du Bocage] is aware of losing something of the original,” by which he means 80 percent of Milton’s lines (p. 155). Although he classifies this work as an “imitation,” following John Dryden’s seventeenth-century guidelines on translational practices, this work is arguably more at home in the genre of pseudo-translation, a genre only recently identified in translation studies. The chapter claims that “Du Bocage altered Milton’s text,” whereas imitation

implies that she wrote an original text *modeled after* Milton’s epic rather than altering the original.

Mario Murgia’s chapter on Milton in Latin America shows how Spanish translations (from the 1850s onward) were employed to supply “Hispano-America’s post-independence need to disseminate a notion of the modern epic and its fundamental libertarian principles” (p. 279). This turn towards Milton in a majority Catholic culture despite his overt Protestantism is explained as follows: “[The] attempted popularization clearly derives from at least three different objectives: the translators’ eagerness to approach the rhetorical novelties of the English epic; their willingness to find, in the aesthetic possibilities of verse, an international equivalent of the libertarian stances of their time; and, in at least two cases, a spiritual exploration of Milton’s views on sin and redemption” (p. 290).

A strong connection between the translation of Milton and politics is also evident in Anne Lange’s chapter on Milton in Estonia, where she notes: “In principle, Milton was a permitted author. For, he had participated in the [great English revolution], to use the standard label by a Soviet historiography that interpreted the mid-seventeenth-century civil war in England as a forerunner of the proletarian revolution” (p. 187); and she explores the tendency of Estonian translators to model the paradise in *Paradise Lost* on the paradise from which Estonia itself stems (p. 192). Both studies are rich in context and raise many unanswered questions, which is good, for it inspires further research into the complex relationship between translation and politics.

Turning more toward the matter of form in Milton’s works and/or the translations are Hélio J. S. Elves’s chapter on Milton in Portugal (or rather the Portuguese effect on Milton), Angelica Duran’s chapter on Milton in (European) Spanish, and Islam Issa’s chapter on Milton in Arabic. Each of these chapters investigates in detail how the target language handles the translation of English, a

source language which is often richer in vocabulary, freer in style thanks to its lack of a gendered case system, and flows more naturally in iambic pentameter than most other languages. Elves's argument that Milton's use of blank verse finds its roots in the *The Lusíads* and other works from the Iberian Peninsula is interesting, as it sketches a broader picture also of the author's social circle and his exposure to foreign literatures through, for example, Richard Fanshawe. Duran's case study showing the inherent difficulties of translating a gender-neutral language into a gendered language brings to the fore an aspect of translation that is often forgotten: how *does* one handle the incongruity of a bisexual character when the Spanish language demands that it be either of one sex or the other, thereby necessarily greatly impacting the translation's fidelity? Issa's chapter on Milton in Arabic is not only instructive on the scope of English literature in Arabic, but also on how (classical) Arabic verse itself works and how this, too, has affected the translation of Milton's English epic poem.

Hiroko Sano, after giving a brief but highly illuminating overview of the four different Japanese writing styles, shows how the chosen writing style affects readers of the Japanese translations of Milton. In trying "to make his translations palatable to Japanese readers," one translator argues in favor of intelligibility over original meaning, while other translators, notably the scholars, have argued for the exact opposite (pp. 460-61). A further conclusion that "Japanese culture has established a history of assimilation and domestication in translation" (p. 463) brings to mind Ástráður Eysteinnsson's chapter on Iceland's Milton, where a similar case is made for the assimilation of the epic in Icelandic. Eysteinnsson writes that "while certain items in Milton's world of cultural and geographic references are lost in translation ... other elements are 'found,'" especially when it comes to the incorporation of cultural references, such as including "Thor's thunders" instead of "the sound | Of thunder" (p. 225). Thus,

the reader of *Milton in Translation* is exposed to a wide variety of cultures, and though at times on the surface they appear to have little in common, red threads of similarity can be traced throughout the volume.

Overall, this ambitious project is a promising step toward the rising field of combining the methods of translation studies and literary studies. Yet, it is clear from the tone and approach of most chapters that the contributors are more at home in literary studies than in translation studies. Translation studies is more than comparing translations to the original. Although this philological approach is a good starting point for most studies, what makes the combination of literary and translational methods such a promising new approach is that it has the potential to reach beyond and to explore the cultural, political, religious, and societal circumstances that resulted in the production of the translation. Of course, I do not mean that this volume should have provided clear-cut conclusions on how and why these translations came into existence, or what purposes the translations of Milton's works serve in twenty-three languages, but it feels like a missed opportunity when a study remains at the surface level of qualitative comparison. On the other hand, those chapters that explore the potential reasons for the significant changes in translated works are truly inspiring and showcase the effectiveness of this new and promising approach. In short, some chapters will leave readers hungry for more, eager to begin exploring the possibilities themselves, while others will leave them wondering, why do these differences matter?

#### Note

[1]. Yolanda Rodríguez Pérez, "The adventures of an Amsterdam Spaniard: Nation-building in a 17th-century Dutch pseudo-translation," in *Interconnecting Translation Studies and Imagology*, ed. Joep Leerssen, Luc van Doorslaer, and Peter Flynn (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), 37-52.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

**Citation:** Rena Bood. Review of Duran, Angelica; Issa, Islam; Olson, Jonathan R., eds. *Milton in Translation*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. February, 2018.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51660>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.