

Stefano Villani, *Making Italy Anglican. Why the Book of Common Prayer Was Translated into Italian*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. xiv, 292, £74.00

In *Making Italy Anglican* Stefano Villani reconstructs the untold story of the Italian translations of the Book of Common Prayer, the liturgical book used in the Church of England since 1549. As Villani clarifies in the introduction, his study is not a literary history, although the text stands as the “common denominator” (9) in the events reconstructed, which stretch from the 17th to the early 20th century. Villani builds on a variety of historiographical frameworks, including Sarpian historiography, in which he himself is an authority; recent studies on the early 17th-century “Anglo-Venetian moment” (4); the vast historiography on the religious interaction between Italy and Great Britain during the Risorgimento; and the nascent one on the significance of the Mediterranean in the British missionary strategy (12). The study is also informed by textual and literary scholarship on the English liturgy, most notably Brian Cumming’s work.

In the introduction to his study Villani agrees with Cummings in seeing the Book of Common Prayer as “a book of conquest and conversion” (1), although the conquest and Anglican conversion of Italy indeed failed blatantly. Villani’s central argument is that the project of making Italy Anglican failed because of the inability of the missionaries to understand the extent to which Catholic culture had shaped the Italian identity and the relations between Church and State since the Counter-Reformation. Yet, reconstructing the “series of interconnected failures” that make up this story is of great interest, since “it highlights the broad scope of Anglo-Italian intercultural relations in the religious sphere, and [...] shows the long-term missionary ambitions” of the English establishment (1).

The book is structured into three parts and ten chapters. We start in early seventeenth century Venice, when William Bedell, theologian of the Church

of England and chaplain to the English ambassador in Venice first translated the English liturgy into Italian (1608). A key figure in the project was Paolo Sarpi, the official theologian of the Republic of Venice, who aimed to produce a suitable alternative to the Catholic rite in anticipation of the birth of a reformed congregation in Venice, and ultimately of the reform of the Church of Rome. Since no copies of Bedell's translation have been found to date, Villani pieces together the details of this project starting from the correspondence exchanged between its promoters. The sources reveal that their debate revolved around linguistic and textual concerns; clearly, Bedell and Sarpi were acting on an understanding of books as principal agents of conversion and of vernacular liturgy as the key to reform.

The translation published by Alessandro Amidei sometimes after 1669 is the focus of chapter 2. An ambiguous figure, Amidei became a teacher of Hebrew in Oxford, Edinburgh and Sion College, and died impoverished in or near Cambridge sometime after 1692. His translation must be placed in the context of the little, and by that time declining, Italian Protestant Church of London, discussed in chapter 3. Amidei's text has survived in a copy for manuscript publication preserved at the British Library, a "hybrid" text characterised by "complex layering", for which Villani suggests a possible source (56-7).

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the first complete Italian edition of the Book of Common Prayer, published in 1685 and known as the "Brown Edition" after its promoter and patron, Edward Brown, a former chaplain of the Levant Company. Brown's intellectual production is described as "a coherent part of a cultural project to restore a tradition of criticism of the Catholic Church" (73), and his edition was explicitly situated in the tradition of Bedell's and Sarpi's project. This translation was the work of Giovan Battista Cappello, a London resident son of a religious exile, and based on the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The reissue of this edition with a different frontispiece in 1708 marked "the last attempt to revive the Italian Protestant Church of London" (81).

In fact, if the 17th century translations were all religiously motivated, Villani finds that those published throughout the 18th century, discussed in chapter 6, were commercial rather than religious enterprises. In the 1733 edition, the text was explicitly advertised as an educational tool to improve the knowledge of Italian. The idea of using the Book as a reading text was likely behind the subsequent editions in 1796, 1820 and 1821. Indeed, as pointed out by Villani, the fact that the text was known by heart by members of the

Church of England made it an invaluable teaching aid, and the flourishing of the Grand Tour as an educational ‘rite of passage’ for young English aristocrats certainly favoured the new market.

A new phase in the history of the Italian translations of the Book of Common Prayer was inaugurated with the 1831 edition, published in Leghorn on behalf of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) and edited by the Anglican cleric George Frederick Nott. Significant revisions to the text and the likely involvement of mother-tongue collaborators open up “a new chapter in the textual history of the Anglican liturgy in Italian” (99), which is discussed in chapter 7. The motivations of the SPCK were missionary, and the subsequent editions promoted by the Society were all part of its foreign language publishing programme. Against the backdrop of Catholic emancipation in 1829 and the birth of the Oxford Movement in 1833, the Anglican liturgy was again being viewed as the best text to promote the Church of England against Catholic countries (111). Interestingly, in 1834 Dante Gabriele Rossetti was involved in the revision of Nott’s translation, but there is evidence that Nott was not much enthused by his comments.

The growth of British missionary ambitions in the Mediterranean is the context for the 19th century editions, discussed in chapters 7 and 8. Villani reconstructs how Malta became a centre for Anglican propaganda, examining the plans for the establishment of an Anglican seminary there, and how the events of the Risorgimento nurtured new hopes for religious reform. He argues that the projects of translation in this phase came from the upper echelons of the SPCK, as there is no evidence that the Society ever established any significant religious dialogue with the Italian immigrants, who were “paid translators rather than religious interlocutors” (126). The chapters are also dedicated to further attempts to promote the distribution of the English liturgy, as the ones directed at the Waldensian Church.

Another revision of the text was completed in 1860 and produced for the Anglo-Continental Society, an organisation of clergymen of the Church of England and of the Episcopalian Church. This text, discussed in chapter 9, marks the definitive end to the Anglican project in Italy, whilst chapter 10 closes the story of the English liturgy in Italian with the American 1904 re-edition for use in the Italian-speaking Episcopal congregations.

In this study, Professor Villani opens up a previously uncharted aspect of Anglo-Italian relations, and, as the rich paratextual apparatus makes clear, an

especially challenging one. The Book has a long and complex textual history, as can be appreciated browsing through the “List of the Italian translations” helpfully provided in the Appendix. However, Villani succeeds in making his story clear and compelling (a glance at the articulate table of contents will provide a good sense of the scholarly scope of the book).

At the heart of Villani’s study are the motives of the people involved in the editorial project in its various manifestations from the 17th to the 20th century. Of the several biographical profiles presented throughout the book, Amidei and Nott may be the most memorable for their idiosyncrasies, but the sketches dedicated to the editors, translators and revisors of the 18th century editions are equally effective in their thoroughness.

Although this is not a literary history, nor “History through a translation perspective”, to quote Christopher Rundle (2011), it can profitably engage with both frameworks. Indeed, Villani points to a textual dimension to the failure of the project of making Italy Anglican, when he argues that the performative nature of the Book of Common Prayer may have hampered its potential as a missionary tool, and throughout the chapters he pays close and consistent attention to the text and its language. For instance, in chapter 2, the speculation that the 17th century translators worked using both English and Latin texts is evidently based on close philological analysis; additionally, the endnotes and the brief but detailed descriptions of amendments and editorial choices bring out the complexity of the sources analysed (one of the most interesting texts in this respect is Nott’s edition, discussed in chapter 7).

Villani brings his historical insight into the discussion when he highlights the political-religious implications of the Italian equivalents to render English ‘priest’ and ‘minister’ (57, 109-110, 117, 144), and especially when he warns against reading too much in editorial choices (89, 109, 126). Another very helpful contextualisation concerns the translation of the passage describing the Church of England as “the mean between the two extremes” in Italian editions published after 1834 (94, 125). The only criticism I have is that sometimes the reader may be left wanting for more examples from the sources; for instance, when the “complex layering” of Amidei’s text and its relationship to its conjectural source are discussed (57-8). In other places, evidence is simply not available; it is particularly unfortunate that the comments made by Dante Gabriele Rossetti, which irritated Nott so much, have not survived (111-12 and 246n37). In conclusion, in *Making Italy Anglican*, Villani demonstrates the significance

of the religious sphere in our understanding of Anglo-Italian relations, opening up a new angle through which they can be explored, not just by historians, but also by linguists and literature scholars.

Bibliography

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