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A. E. B. Coldiron, *Printers Without Borders*

by Hannah Crawforth

Coldiron, A.E.B. *Printers without Borders: Translation and Textuality in the Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015. xv + 339 pages. ISBN: 978-1-107-07317-3. £65 hardback.

It is no news to Spenser scholars that the English Renaissance was a multilingual phenomenon shaped by the rapid development of printing technologies. Spenser is himself at the forefront of translinguistic borrowing (his versions of Van der Noodt, DuBellay and Petrarch) and experiments more fully with the materiality of his texts upon the page than many of his contemporaries (*A Theatre for Worldlings*, *The Shepheardes Calender*). Indeed, Spenser's experimental approach to making and remaking language is one of the most distinctive aspects of his poetic style, while the creativity with which he approaches the printing of his poems (as in his expressive font choices in the *Calender*) represents a landmark moment in the history of Early Modern book history. If Spenser's work shows us how poets can creatively deploy the resources of translation and the printing press, A.E.B. Coldiron's *Printers without Borders* argues that the reverse is also true; translators and printers

should be seen as playing a crucial part in the extraordinary poetic outpouring of the English Renaissance.

Coldiron's important book shows us why Spenser should be seen as fully representative of his cultural moment, rather than exceptional, in this regard. Her focus, however, moves away from an author-centric model of textual production and instead emphasizes other creative roles, most notably those of printers and translators, whom she compares to the film producers of the genre's early days: "not faceless middlemen or technicians, but entrepreneurs, experimenters, and innovators," who transformed their materials for an array of new audiences (3).

Printers Without Borders elegantly marries the latest developments in translation studies and the new(er) bibliography (or new book history), arguing for the fundamental connection between the role of the translator and that of the printer in determining the trajectory of English literary culture. Coldiron offers an important corrective to prevailing accounts of Early Modern literary history as a new sense of the canon emerges out of her translator and printer-oriented view of textual production in the period. Coldiron's account helps build our picture of the literary creativity of figures such as William Caxton, who was not only a "good businessman and a creative entrepreneur" in her view, "a savvy salesman and resourceful techie" but also a "quasi-humanist translator explicitly concerned for his society, his country, his language and his literary culture" (37).

The "period" in question here is crucially redefined; working at the boundary between the Medieval and the Early Modern, Coldiron argues for the crucial significance of the years 1473 to 1588 in the evolution of what was, at that time, a still emerging field: English vernacular literature. This was a moment of "new information technology and concomitant, multidimensional changes," she writes. Furthermore it is printing and translation that together shape this period; they were the "key catalysts of this special phase of literary history" that gave impetus to the Renaissance itself, converging "to energize the grand cultural agendas" of Early Modern England (2). Those of us used to approaching Spenser via his debt to Chaucer will be in no doubt of the efficacy of this revisionist approach to periodization. Nor will we be unsettled by Coldiron's focus on Anglo-French textual relations in particular; Chaucer's heavily Norman vocabulary is everywhere in Spenser's writing, and the Elizabethan poet testifies most splendidly to the cross-fertilization of the two literary cultures that is mapped here, the "constitutive foreignness" of Early

Modern English literature (1)—or “co-presence of cultures” in Karlheinz Stierle’s formulation (7).

Coldiron elucidates the beautifully complex relationship between “foreign” and “native” traditions in Renaissance literary culture, their complete inextricability from one another and the paradoxical importance of alterity in establishing a national literature, another argument with significant implications for our field. Spenser’s (not always complimentary) view of English as built out of “borrowing here of the French, there of the Italian, every where of the Latine” resonates with Coldiron’s view of literatures written in other languages as fundamental to English poetics, “as structure, rhizome, residue, and resonance” (7).^[1] In fact, the poet who points out to his contemporaries that they are “in their own mother tonge straungers to be counted and alienes” arguably held an even more radical view; Spenser is not just interested in importing foreign literatures into English but in showing what is foreign about his native tongue, the sense of alienation that governs his relation to it, as Catherine Nicholson has shown.^[2]

The book is organized—perhaps slightly confusingly—around ten case studies in six chapters, exploring three different models for the impact of print and translation on literary culture. That the structure of Coldiron’s book does not map neatly onto the categories she is exploring is in fact a strength; she is at pains to stress that the models offered here are necessarily provisional. “They are metaphors,” she rightly acknowledges, “and every metaphor breaks down at some point of inapplicability” (30). The first of these terms, the “catenary pattern,” is used here to suggest the digressive and reiterative nature of Early Modern textual transmission, and Coldiron explores under this rubric works produced by Caxton that offer multiple versions of the same text over a long period, notably the “englishing” of Burgandian historiographer Raoul Lefèvre’s *Recuyell of the Hystories of Troye*, the *Dictes and Sayengis of the Philosophres*, and a translation from Alain Chartier’s anti-court *Curial*, printed in connection with English rebellions in 1483 and 1549 as the *Coppye of a Lettre*. These are translations that are made and remade over time, and Coldiron makes clear how each version is in dialogue with its predecessors.

Jerome McGann’s idea of radiant textuality informs the second category explored here, that of translations of the same work into several different languages within a short space of time, usually issued by the same printer. Vernacular *ars moriendi* appeared in this way, as did multiple versions of the

Golden Legend (which Spenser of course knew well and draws upon in *The Faerie Queene*). Practical works such as almanacs, datebooks, navigational aids, and books of husbandry or medicine often took this multilingual form, as did fashions for translations of certain poets, notably Ovid and Virgil. Finally, Coldiron explores the idea of compressed translation patterns—polyglot books fall under this description, as do macronic poems at the more extreme end of the spectrum. Such forms of multilingual *mise-en-page* generate immediate contact between the native and the foreign for their readers, making it impossible to think of English literature (and hence the English nation and its politics) outside of the context of its (usually European) neighbors.

Printers without Borders thus moves elegantly from more expansive or digressive forms of printed translation to those that concentrate or distill, from texts that put differing languages into dialogue with one another over a long period of time to those that offer a more immediate or instantaneous interaction. This structure certainly generates its own insights, and while the three patterns mapped here—catenary, radiant and compressed—have their self-acknowledged limits, viewing the printing and translation practices of the period on such a spectrum does not. As Coldiron says, “as transmission patterns loop and meander, or dilate and punctuate, or radiate, or compress and hyper-compress, they show us the precise loci and means of encounter with the foreign that straight-line literary histories do not reveal as clearly” (30).

In what remains of this review I wish to focus briefly on the chapter of Coldiron’s book that perhaps has the most to offer to Spenserians: her study of John Wolfe, and particularly his trilingual version of the *Courtier*. Wolfe is best known to us as the first printer of *The Faerie Queene* (1590) but his relationship with Spenser has long been recognized as going well beyond this, based firmly in their shared anti-Catholicism and their mutual friendship with Gabriel Harvey (something of a rare distinction, or acquired taste). Andrew Hadfield believes that Spenser spent considerable time with Wolfe, who “encouraged writers to frequent his house and printing shop in Distaff Lane, south-east of St Paul’s churchyard at the heart of the London publishing industry.”^[3] The biographical likelihood supports Coldiron’s view of their shared creative endeavor. Like Spenser, Wolfe was multinational in his outlook; he published many Italian works including those by Aretino and Machiavelli, as well as Castiglione’s bestseller, which concerns Coldiron here.

Positioning the Italian text alongside Chappuy's French translation and Hoby's English version was a radical move by Wolfe; while all three texts were readily available in Spenser's England this was the only book to place them in parallel columns, inviting—or even forcing—the reader to compare across languages as (s)he read.

Coldiron persuasively connects this aspect of Wolfe's book to the Armada threat of its publication year, 1588, suggesting that it is designed to encourage Elizabethan courtiers to fashion themselves in trans-European terms, "taking on alternate foreign perspectives, at least temporarily" (181). I am less convinced than Coldiron of the role of catchwords at the bottom of each of the three columns in firmly guiding reading (given their ubiquity in the period and clear function within the printer's shop) (180). But there is undoubted political significance to this juxtaposition of texts that reflects the wider aim of *Printers without Borders*, urging us to understand the creative role that printers and translators together play in Early Modern literary production. Coldiron argues that Wolfe's decision to print these translations alongside one another is a pedagogical practice comparable to Spenser's allegory; both men produce texts that offer "instructive" experience, or cause their readers to undergo "processes of discernment" (178).

This brief, Spenserian, example is representative of the new insight that arises from this book's productive insistence on reading translators and printers as literary agents in their own right, often working collaboratively with Early Modern English poets. *Printers without Borders* is lucidly written, beautifully shaped, and contains at its core a highly compelling argument. It will be of interest to scholars of the Medieval and Early Modern periods, offering yet another reminder that we should continue to think across this divide, and to think very widely about the role and function of authorship itself.

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[1] "Epistle" to *The Shepheardes Calendar*, in *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et al (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), at

16.

[2] Catherine Nicholson, *Uncommon Tongues: Eloquence and Eccentricity in Sixteenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2014), reviewed [here](#); Hannah Crawforth, "Strangers to our own 'Mother Tongue': Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* and Early Anglo-Saxon Studies," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 41 (2011): 293-316; also Paula Blank on Spenser's representing "what seems most foreign" as "what is most native," *Broken English: Dialects and the Politics of Language in Renaissance Writings* (London: Routledge, 1996), at 113.

[3] Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), at 236.

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