

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Giovanni Battista Guarini, *A Poetry Precise and Free: Selected Madrigals of Guarini*, edited by Nicholas R. Jones (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018). Xv+245pp. ISBN 9 7804 7213 072 6.

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Giovanni Battista Guarini is a late-Renaissance figure of some substance. Born in 1538 in Ferrara he served as a diplomat, as a professor of rhetoric and poetry and as a restless composer of madrigals — the focus of this enjoyable if rather unusual book. Much travelled and patronised by the influential Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II d'Este, he saw service in Turin, Venice, Rome and Krakow. He is probably best-known to scholars of early modern English culture as the author of the pastoral tragicomedy, *Il Pastor Fido* — this seminal Italian play was translated by Richard Fanshawe and published as *The Faithful Shepherd* in 1647. That play was the basis of Handel's 1712 opera of the same name: Guarini's works have had a long afterlife. His madrigals are still performed today, especially the ones set to music by Monteverdi. Indeed, Nicholas R. Jones tells us that his sixteen-year project to produce this book was inspired directly by the stimulating experience of singing Guarini's words to Monteverdi's settings. Throughout the book, Jones stresses that madrigals are all about performance. It is tricky to define exactly what a madrigal is. Basically, it is a lyric poem that may be sung with or without accompaniment; it is secular in theme and pithy in words, addressing a certain emotional expression with both compactness and flexibility so that the singer/s can improvise dynamically and tonally. It is an expressive form, one often containing a cutting irony and/or a seismic turn in emphasis within its short lines.

This book is a celebration of the form's flexibility. But, as mentioned previously, it is an unusual book. It has elements of an edition/translation of Guarini's work, a critical introduction to the genre and the author, a bibliographic repository concerning works by and about Guarini and even a sort of scholar's memoir. The book consists of an unusually long 'Preface', a fairly chatty but informative 'Introduction' then 150 poems

by Guarini, presented both in Italian and in self-confessedly idiosyncratic English translations by Jones. The book concludes with an alphabetical list of first lines in Italian, an intimidatingly enormous list of published vocal settings of Guarini's madrigals, helpful notes, a terrific bibliography, a useful subject index and an even more useful thematic index. The last item is very handy if one wishes to look for examples of, say, avian imagery in the poems. The 150 madrigals selected are chosen through transparently subjective choices made by Jones. He chooses 150 poems by Guarini because an important 1598 edition assembled by Giovanni Battista Ciotti includes 150 Guarini madrigals. But Jones does not include the same 150 madrigals so the number and selection works as a personalised tribute to Guarini and Ciotti rather than as a strictly scholarly edition. It is a bit like honouring the 1609 publication of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* by preparing an edition of 154 Shakespeare sonnets, removing two random ones from that 1609 Quarto and inserting, say, the opening sonnet from *Romeo and Juliet* and an imagined reconstruction of the Dauphin-composed sonnet to a horse in *Henry V*. In other words, this isn't a scholarly, textual edition. It isn't supposed to be — it is an attempt to spread enthusiasm for the expressive possibilities of the madrigal format.

Jones splits the poems into ten named sections; the madrigals are all about love so some readers may wonder if it is necessary to split the works into sections as mutually complementary as 'Love and Indifference' and 'Lover's Anxieties'. The poems are numbered rather than given names. The translations themselves are very loose; much license is taken. Jones goes so far as to remove the poems' rhymes; he justifies this with a slightly vague claim about English 'lacking the resonant inflections of Italian' (p. 22). That said, Jones certainly succeeds in his aim of producing 'a set of readable, understandable poems in contemporary English' (p. 21) because the poems, although slightly buried amidst fulsome (albeit learned and helpful) commentary are enjoyable to read. The commentary can be intrusive and sometimes Jones tries too hard to make the madrigals seem relevant to audiences today: the masculinist bravado of one madrigal, for example, is compared to that of fighter pilots in *Star Wars* and *Top Gun* (p. 124). Bizarrely, Jones even mentions the F-16 fighter jet by name in his translation of the poem: this is the loosest of loose translations, an outrageously anachronistic conceit. In 2020 terms the two cited films are hardly cutting-edge either, but that is not the point. It is a jarring, strained comparison.

Even without music the madrigals are always enjoyable to read. (Did Jones ever consider including a CD to accompany this book?) Generally, they express, with some melodrama, a constructed, hyperbolic lover's ecstasy and/or angst. Sometimes the emotion can be exhilarating or despondent — or sometimes both. In Madrigal 26, for

example, the speaker is not sure if he will find joy like Daedalus or ‘drown like Icarus’ (p. 53). Some assert with defiance the unmoving devotion of the first-person lover. For example, in Madrigal 27 the speaker cannot respond to any arrow from Love because the one that mattered penetrated his psyche definitively and permanently some time previously. Sometimes, though, the lover wavers and is both delighted and terrified by the sight of his glamorous beloved, desperately striving to ‘screw my courage to the sticking point’ (p. 55). Jones is straightforward about the looseness of his translations but the Shakespearean borrowing here seems laid on with a trowel (reviewers can cheekily allude to Shakespeare too). The madrigals are sometimes bathetic rather than pathetic: it is hard to know whether to respond with sardonic laughter or sensitive pity as the lover reports grittily in Madrigal 126 that he might be ‘drawing my last breath’ as his lover ‘could not care less’ (p. 151). One’s response is likely to depend upon the intonations and stresses of the performer/s. And that is perhaps the ultimate point of this enjoyable but odd book. Madrigals can be enjoyed on the page but it is an incomplete enjoyment. Madrigals continue to be performed by specialised ensembles — I would, for example, recommend that anyone visiting Ceredigion attends a concert by Aberystwyth University’s seventy-year-old Elizabethan Madrigal Singers choir. The madrigal genre doesn’t need references to dodgy American films of the last century to thrive in this century. If this odd but passionate and personal book inspires further performative engagement with this vital Renaissance genre then Jones’ sixteen-year labour was worthwhile.