

Cultures in Contact

Translation and Reception of I Promessi Sposi in 19th Century England

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Cultures in Contact

This volume, which is the result of a university research project, pertains to the broad and fertile field of critical studies concerning the interaction between English and Italian letters and cultures. Its focal point is the analysis of the complex relations surrounding the translation and reception of Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (1827) in England and a few years later in America, in the assumption that translation is central and essential to intercultural relations, as Translation Studies has shown. The coincidence with the 150th anniversary of Italy's Risorgimento and Independence, in which Manzoni (1785–1873) played a primary role and England was historically involved, adds a special flavour to this study.

The English interest in Manzoni's work is strictly connected with the recognition of the European stature of the Milanese writer as a great poet and theorist of Romanticism, an intellectual deeply engaged in Christian ethical thought, and, more significantly for this study, as a major Italian novelist. The book pays specific attention not only to the intercultural relations between England and Italy, but also with America, and the other major European powers, that is France and Germany, that first turned their attention to a writer coming from a divided land then subjected to foreign domination, and finally assigned him a high place in the international literary Olympus. The critical consensus that his poetic and dramatic works received from the European intellectual elite was conveyed by the main channels of editorial and academic diffusion, such as reviews, journals, lectures, and above all by translations. He was also supported by many Italian intellectuals and patriots, mostly exiles in the European countries and in America.

In Italy, Manzoni's literary corpus marked a divide in national letters, in that his art fully interpreted the passage from the conventional and sterile scheme of a persisting classicism to a literature with a European breadth, a transition to modernity that soon won Manzoni the title of major romantic poet, and gained him vast popularity with the publication of his only novel. Moreover, in the particular historical plight of Italy, which was not yet a nation, though aspiring to become united and independent, Manzoni's effort to find a new standard language for his novel was a fundamental contribution to the cause of Italian national and cultural identity.

In nineteenth-century England and America, Manzoni's works, though not often appearing in full text translations, anyway covered a wide spectrum including poems, plays, philosophical, historical and religious enquiries, lit-

erary essays, and above all *I promessi sposi*, which underwent six translations (four in England and two in America) and a lot of re-issues and school editions. However remarkable the diffusion of Manzoni's works in the Anglo-Saxon world was, they did not gain him the same favour and influence other great Italians of the past, such as Dante, Petrarch or Tasso, had and still enjoyed. The notable interest aroused by the Milanese writer for more than two decades at least, was not confined to fashionable circles or due to mere contingency, nor did it vanish at the end of the century, but, though in a lower tone, continued in the twentieth century, when new English and American scholars engaged in fresh translations of *I promessi sposi* and tackled works never translated before.