

Christopher Marlowe, *Il Massacro di Parigi. Con la morte del duca di Guisa*, edited and translated by Cristiano Ragni. Perugia: Morlacchi Editore, 2017. 312pp. ISBN: 9788860749420. €15 (paperback).

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Published in 2017 by Morlacchi, Cristiano Ragni's *Il Massacro di Parigi. Con la morte del Duca di Guisa* represents the newest contribution to the Italian translations of Christopher Marlowe's works. The last Italian translation of one of Marlowe's plays, *Didone regina di Cartagine* by Antonio Ziosi, was published in 2015 by Carocci; as for the *Massacre* itself, this is the second time this play has been translated into Italian. The first, and last, translation of this play by Rodolfo Wilcock dates back to 1966: as Ragni realised, it was high time a new edition was published.

Ragni also deserves gratitude for providing an extensive, thorough critical commentary of the play in Italian for the first time, something that alone makes the publication of this volume noteworthy. However arduous it may seem, due to the intricate quality of Marlowe's life as an author and man, Ragni fascinatingly untangles the Gordian knot of the question of the playwright's persona. He puts on a sort of exhibition in his highly informative introduction to the volume, in which the various depictions of the playwright throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are showcased through a diachronic and organic synthesis of those voices who have contributed to the construction and reception of Marlowe's image over time. The reader is usefully provided with a detailed account of both Marlowe's biography and the series of critical visions and revisions his character and status as an author and debated playwright have undergone until contemporary days.

Joining the debate himself, Ragni openly adopts the same stance as critics such as Robert Logan and Gilberto Sacerdoti, who never let the historical and political context out of sight when approaching Marlowe's tragedies. This proves to be crucial and extremely poignant in the case of the translation of a play so closely knitted with politics and history as well as still being relevant to a contemporary audience. An instance of how successfully Ragni deploys this critical stance is to be seen in Marlowe's detailed synoptic biography that is printed side by side with a historical timeline. All this, along with the addition of many

critical endnotes, makes even the less experienced reader aware of the historical context in which such a masterpiece was produced.

The label of masterpiece might sound surprising to some and is definitely not to be taken for granted, as the *Massacre* has been judged over the centuries more as Marlowe's botch than a dignified play. However, quoting Roy Eriksen, Ragni deems its "textual patterns" and ambiguities as key features of the play. He remarks that the patchiness of the text is indeed functional to the bloody and shocking spectacle on stage. Though acknowledging its limitations, then, Ragni sees in the *Massacre* the same siren-like call of any other Marlovian work: he argues that the text is, in fact, a coherent, carefully crafted play, whose ambiguity results from the difficult dialectic between Marlowe, its sources and the looming historical context, fully embodied by the Act of Uniformity, through which Elizabeth I outlawed religious performances as a way to prevent religious conflicts from spreading in her country.

After tracing back the sources of the *Massacre*—interestingly even the oral ones, namely the accounts gathered by Marlowe in his travels to Canterbury, where he came into contact with some Huguenot refugees—Ragni turns to Marlowe's *hic et nunc* once again, persuasively reading the staging of the infamous bloodshed as an attempt to exorcise the fear of a post-Armada civil war. The blood of the Huguenots slain in the massacre was still fresh in everyone's mind, especially Marlowe's, so that the *Massacre* can be seen as the climax of the playwright's condemnation and intolerance of Christian radicalism and idealism, be it Protestant or Catholic.

Ragni observes echoes of Niccolò Machiavelli's and Giordano Bruno's thought in Marlowe's *Massacre* and underlines the intellectual proximity between the play, Bruno's *Spaccio de la bestia trionfante* and Machiavelli's *Discorsi*. In particular, hidden in the lines spoken by the villain De Guise, there seems to be an actual denunciation: the playwright was in fact accusing the "religion of power" and aligning his moral message with Bruno's and Machiavelli's vision of religion as a political and social instrument aimed at keeping the peace and the social order, a "new" religion and resource to the State.

Ragni's translation itself is a remarkable achievement, especially insofar as it proves to be faithful to the ambiguities of the source text, which the author carefully strives to preserve, while the detailed endnotes draw interesting connections between Marlowe and several of Shakespeare's works, thus directing the volume both towards readers who cross Marlowe's path for the first time and *habitués*. For example, in the words Navarre utters at the beginning of the eighteenth scene, Ragni sees an engrossing connection to the very same

words spoken by Edward IV in Shakespeare and Marlowe's *Henry VI Part III* (an attribution recently made by the editors of *The New Oxford Shakespeare*). In addition, the endnotes link some of the play passages to another Marlovian political play, *Edward II*, thereby showing what T. S. Eliot had astutely noted in his *Sacred Wood*: Marlowe was well aware of the impact of his best lines and he therefore used to recycle the passages that worked best, echoing himself from play to play.

In conclusion, this translation never lacks "energia e passione," to borrow Ragni's words, and it proves remarkably attuned to the playwright's bombastic, powerful and piercing spirit and diction. Also, it marks a step forward to the reception of Marlowe's plays in Italy: Ragni's edition has finally cast light on a play often overlooked even by critics and will be an invaluable instrument for a greater number of Italian scholars and students as compared to the 1966 translation of the *Teatro Completo* by Wilcock. "Peril is the chiefest way to happiness," declares Guise in his monologue, and this claim is particularly fitting for Ragni's attempt at taming the tide of Marlowe's controversial imagery and impassioned lines; however difficult and risky, the enterprise proved successful in the end.