

## REVIEW

NICHOLAS MORROW WILLIAMS,  
*IMITATION OF THE SELF:*  
*JIANG YAN AND CHINESE POETICS.*  
LEIDEN: BRILL, 2015.

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We are fortunate that Jiang Yan has attracted the scholarly attention of Nicholas Morrow Williams. In this well-researched book, Williams places Jiang Yan in context. He makes Jiang's poetry more accessible, explicating many of his poems while translating several. Judicious and insightful comments are offered that compare poems of shared lineage leading up to the poet and including him. Without such explication, the poetry would be semi-comprehensible at best. Williams has tackled some of the "worst" (i.e., most intractable) of Jiang Yan's "best": notably, the series of thirty "Poems in Diverse Poems" that engages with earlier poets.

The author brings out the centrality of "imitation poetry" to the development of pentasyllabic verse. He is quite correct in highlighting the non-biographical nature of most poetry of the period, referring to "the intertextuality of classic allusion, shared topoi, borrowed imagery, and specific reference" (41). "Six Dynasties poems are frequently composed in response to other poems rather than as literal descriptions of recent events" (18). "A poem is not just a description of a particular moment; it enacts an arc through space and time, passing by earlier literary works and historical events" (18).

Williams treats as "imitations" those poems through the Six Dynasties that have *ni* 擬, *xiao* 效, *fang* 仿, or *xue* 學 in their title: what he refers to as "the self-definition of imitation poetry" (51). Rather than "imitations," it would have been more accurate in most cases to speak of a writer "emulating, being inspired by, doing/performing a variation on, evoking, following in the steps of, modeling on, using as a point of departure," or writing "in the lineage of, in the manner of, after the style of, or in the mode of" an earlier work. The titles make explicit that the poems are meant to bring to mind, echo, and resonate with their models. Few, I think, were written to "imitate" them, as the English word is generally used and understood. "Imitation" is too restrictive; notwithstanding the author's effort to recontextualize

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it, it is ineluctably pejorative. The reader is advised to put the expression in quotation marks mentally throughout the book.

Limiting “imitation poetry” to those that are self-identified makes for a manageable topic. But it skirts the question of those poems that are consciously modeled on earlier writings but are not so identified; or those that unconsciously echo earlier texts. In a sense, nearly all writing is imitation: later works necessarily repeat earlier language and are subject to genre and other conventions. Williams is aware of the problem (177). He speaks of “the intertextuality of writing, the endless web of echoes and unintentional quotations that make up human discourse” (2); “literature becomes a durable system of interacting images, devices, and allusions” (28-29); and “text’ itself derives from the Latin *texere*, ‘to weave’” (30). The tradition is a *mise en abyme* (12, 129): a house of mirrors reflecting an infinite regression of ever-receding images—self-identified “imitation poems” are only more explicitly such, ubiquitous allusion being a major component of their fabric.

Williams outlines possible motives behind “imitation poetry,” the writing of which might be (and has been) viewed as a way of practicing poetic technique, of paying homage to past writers, or of correcting or expanding earlier work. It can disguise one’s own disappointments and concerns (Williams is especially good at bringing out this dimension). It also provides a means to bask in the reflected glory of past masters, identify with them, present oneself as their natural heir.

What is striking about these motives is their parallel with those identified in theories of translation. Translation too has generally taken to be “second-order activity,” not the creative endeavor it in fact is. Both are commonly thought of as being a displacement from the “real job” of a writer. Williams scotches the idea: “An imitation poem is at once new and old, the essential conception drawn from earlier poetry but interfused with something different” (38).

Williams’ treatment of Jiang Yan’s *fu* is inspired, especially the “*Fu* on the Sea Anemone” with its “tiny and insignificant nature” (149). A paragraph summarizing Xie Lingyun’s series of imitations is outstanding (132). The description of Jiang Yan’s textual journeys “back into the *Chuci*” is excellent (196). And the point he makes about the mindless attention given by many scholars to the dating of poems, making them mere biographical artefacts, is well-taken: “[The] approach buries literary interpretation itself” (186).

Williams offers a useful framework for thinking of the progression of “imitation poems” from Fu Xuan to Lu Ji and Xie Lingyun to Jiang Yan. And he sees in Jiang’s series, “Fifteen Odes to Plants and Trees,” three groups of five (158), namely, those that underscore “metaphorical values,” those that emphasize “visual splendor” (a counterpart to virtue), and those that “combine homage to abstract virtues with identification of the specific powers of those plants.” Whether right or wrong, these are useful heuristic devices, helpful ways to organize disparate material.

Williams is at his best when drawing on wide reading to make generalizations that were at best only inchoate in (at least) this reviewer’s mind. For example, the advent of Shen Yue’s

rules “made many famous lines of earlier poetry strictly unquotable whenever they did not conform to the new regulations” (28); and “Jiang Yan’s poetic style was conservative, and though he lived into the sixth century, his extant writings show little trace of the transformations of the Yongming era or the Liang court” (171). Such *aperçus*, found throughout the volume, are perhaps its best feature.

The author shines when explicating certain citations; for example, when pointing out that Liu Xie in a passage is simultaneously discussing intertextuality, giving a history of it, and performing it (37). He also gives a wonderful summary of Liu’s view of writing: “literature is a kind of patterning that mimics the patterns of the universe and the unchanging *dao*; it is ... often innovative, but never new” (39). Liu Xie’s triple performance brings to mind Zhong Rong’s critical vocabulary, where terms are potentially tripartite in reference: encapsulating a writer, his work, and/or the feelings evoked by the work.

“Three” also has its counterpart in Jiang Yan. In addition to the “double voice of [his] imitation poetry: writer as reader, reader as poet, poet as actor” (106), his thirty “Diverse Forms” are (A) imitations, (B) impersonations, and (C) evocations (intensifications, amplifications, reanimations) of an author. Williams writes that, in Poem 10, Jiang “is imitating the relatively simple style of Zhang Hua” (48). In Poem 3, he is “writing not just after Lady Ban but *as* Lady Ban” (9, italics in original). And Poem 13, while being neither imitation nor personification, “is an amplification and intensification of certain features of its models [Zuo Si’s poetry]” (76).

Not surprisingly, Williams is more successful in his treatment of those of the thirty poems that he goes into detail about in the body of the book, where he explains the resonances between the Jiang Yan poem and earlier writing, and where the allusions are more likely to be clarified. But with the dozen or so poems among the thirty *not* treated in the body of the text but included in the Appendix, the problem is that, whereas allusions are cited in the notes, their import and function are seldom clarified. One is left asking: But what do they mean? How are they being used? This reflects a perennial problem, especially in Chinese and Japanese commentary on Chinese texts.<sup>1</sup>

Williams cites several articles that I was unfamiliar with and have since learned from. But there are citations missing from his bibliography, reference to which, or engagement with which, would have contributed to the volume: the Hanabusa Hideki annotated translations of *shi* in the *Wen xuan* (vols. 3-4 in the 7-volume complete rendering of the text, individual volumes by Obi Kōichi and by him);<sup>2</sup> the Luo Liqian and Li Kaijin modern-language transla-

1 I address this in my 2011 article, “The *Kanshi* of Mori Ōgai: Allusion and Diction” (*Japonica Humboldtiana* 14, pp. 89-107).

2 They are more comprehensive than those found in the Shiba Rokurō and Hanabusa Hideki volume, and the Uchida Sennosuke and Ami Yūji one, both of which are cited.

tion of all of Jiang Yan's writing in the sometimes disparaged Sanmin Shuju series, *Guji jinzhu xinyi congshu*;<sup>3</sup> the complete rendering of Ruan Ji's eighty-two-poem series by Victor Mair in his *Four Introspective Poets* volume;<sup>4</sup> and the Donald Gibbs dissertation on the *Wenxin diaolong*, with its very helpful treatment of the *tong/bian* dynamic (which Williams terms "continuity as change" [32]). Other references would also have been welcome: to my book on Yuan Haowen, which offers a different way of construing *in poetry* the history of poetry, and which in turn inspired at least a dozen later poem-series; to the Hans Neef German-language translation of four poems in Jiang's fifteen-poem series, "Odes to Plants and Trees" (Poems 5, 9, 10, and 11); and to David Knechtges' highly critical *CLEAR* review of the John Marney book on Jiang Yan.<sup>5</sup>

Williams' translations represent an attempt to follow the original as scrupulously as possible. As a result, several lines remain too abstractly general and hang untethered in mid-air; the argument of the poem becomes unnecessarily hard to follow. A key factor: couplets in many cases could be better treated as integral units, both visually and with transition words to yoke the two lines. (Then again, Williams does a good job with the Lady Ban imitation.) Word choices are sometimes unfortunate: e.g., "patchouli," "dhole," and "dally" (in those cases where it carries unwanted sexual overtones). I would prefer renderings where the phrasing of the English line is prioritized, balance in the couplet emphasized, and blocks and wholes constructed that cohere and gel. When re-creating an original poem in translation, it helps not to be too wedded to it.

There are also odd wordings outside the translations: for example, in the context, "ecumenical" (24); "orthogonal" (55); and (in modern usage, at least) "The second half of the poem thus *comports well with* the Jian'an tradition of symposium poems" (131). Also, "It adapts ... in a way that is *rather* typical of its period" (163) and "The 'Fu on Parting' is a *recursive interrogation* of human sorrow" (170) are unfortunate. Particularly so is the formulation, "[The Jian'an masters] were *worthier than we* of the present day" (129). (Italics added.) The terms "ekphrasis," "prosopoeia," and "metalepsis" are cursorily explained and less than ideally integrated into the text; they draw unwanted attention to themselves. Their usage might better have been confined to the footnotes.

On the plus side, there are several pleasing formulations in the book. For example, Xie Lingyun and Jiang Yan's evocation of Jian'an poets is "a *séance-like* summoning of the voices

3 The quality of translations varies with each volume, but the Ruan Ji and Jiang Yan volumes present intelligible, plausible renderings.

4 This omission is especially unfortunate, since Mair also includes translations of three other major series of poems—by Chen Zi'ang, Zhang Jiuling, and Li Bai—two of which are cited by Williams.

5 Notwithstanding his comments, I admire Marney's felicitous compression of statement when translating many lines and his attempts to identify resonances with earlier poets.

of the dead to speak again in the present" (106). Certain of Jiang Yan's poems are "*Chuci*-inflected" (180 and elsewhere). And "Li Ling's Chu song is located at a specific moment in space and time, but the pentasyllabic Su Wu and Li Ling poems are more like a mathematical vector with a definite orientation and magnitude, but no specified position" (94).

A few alternative renderings follow. "Poetry issues from (i.e., is drawn from, is occasioned by) feeling" (9). "Zhong Hui attributed a disquisition of his to Ruan Ji" (45). "The things I think of are not but one" (164). "For each I have composed an ode, to give vent to my burdened soul" (183).

I wish the author had outlined more clearly in the introduction, and in much greater detail, the argument of the chapters that follow. It would have helped a great deal to know what to expect and how the volume unfolds. As things stand, sometimes it is difficult to follow the argument. Nevertheless, the volume well repays the effort.

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