Mirella Agorni

THE VOICE OF THE 'TRANSLATRESS': FROM APHRA BEHN TO ELIZABETH CARTER

Eighteenth-century women's writing activities have recently attracted a certain degree of critical interest, but attention has generally been focused on specific literary genres, such as autobiography, the novel, drama, and, more recently, poetry. Other genres, such as historical writing, reviewing, and above all translation have often been neglected or given only marginal consideration. Yet translation represented one of the very few cultural activities open to women in the early modern period.[1] The main reason for this neglect seems to be the derivative nature of translation, which has always been perceived as marginal *vis-à-vis* original production. Furthermore, the notion of authorship is put in jeopardy by any act of translation, since the relationship between original author and translator can never be taken for granted.

Douglas Robinson has recently emphasized the emergence of a phenomenon he defines as the 'feminization' of translation in sixteenth-century England. At that time women started to exploit the discourse of translation in order to find a public voice and at the same time to counter the widespread belief which equated publication with sexual licentiousness.[2] According to Tina Krontiris, a woman translator 'could hide behind another author (usually male) and protect herself against accusations pertaining to ideas and content'.[3] During the Reformation period women were encouraged to undertake translation of religious works, and

[1] As Margaret Patterson Hannay points out, women could also occasionally subvert the original, and insert their personal or political statements. See *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators and Writers of Religious Works,* ed. by Margaret Patterson Hannay (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1986), p. 4.

[2] Douglas Robinson, 'Theorizing Translation in a Woman's Voice: Subverting the Rhetoric of Patronage, Courtly Love and Morality', *The Translator',* I (1995) 153-75 (p. 153).

[3] *Oppositional Voices: Women as Writers and Translators of Literature in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 21.

this helped to create a greater flexibility in the field of female publication. However, the same religious motivations which allowed women to work on translation can be perceived as a means to prevent their venture into original literary production. As Sherry Simon points out: 'We are led to wonder whether translation condemned women to the margins of discourse or, on the contrary, rescued them from imposed silence.'[4] Like any other literary activity, translation is the product of complex cultural and historical constraints and therefore it can be argued that while it had an emancipating effect on women's writing in certain historical periods, on other occasions it worked in the service of conservative and restrictive forces with an inhibiting influence on female literary expression. It is hardly useful to look for some sort of historical progression in women's use of translation. Any translation project must be considered *per Se,* being the product of a number of heterogeneous constraints such as the role played by patronage, the prestige of the original text, the influence of ideological and cultural pressures, and so on, but over and above all it should be emphasized, in Janet Todd's words, that 'literature is not progressive'.[5] For instance, Todd points out that some sophisticated narrative techniques of late-seventeenth-century women writers, such as the use of an independent narrative voice, will be heard again only a hundred years later.[6] Hence, it does not seem useful to look for linear developments in literature as has often been the case, for example, with the accounts of the birth of the novel. Attempts at reading literary history in this way have often proved teleologically biased, as Ros Ballaster demonstrates in her analysis of existing critical literature on the rise of the novel:

The rise in prestige of the novel form through the century does not necessarily betoken increasing sophistication in narrative technique, nor should we allow our analysis

[4] *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 46.

[5] Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 2.

[6] Todd is referring to the experiments in the use of narrative voices by women writers such as Behn and Delarivier Manley, which will be repeated by Fanny Burney and Ann Radcliffe only in the late eighteenth century. Todd, p. 2.

of eighteenth-century fiction to be overly determined by the realist aesthetics that came to dominate in the century that followed.[7]

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the impact of the complex ideological process defined as 'feminization' of early-eighteenth-century literature on the activity of women translators. The distinctive outspokenness of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women translators was not going to be matched by their eighteenth-century successors. Paradoxically, Aphra Behn's translation of a scientific treatise by the French philosopher Fontenelle offered her a better opportunity to voice her experience as a woman and a writer than a similar translation would do for Elizabeth Carter fifty years later, in spite of the fact that Carter's work was specifically addressed to a female readership. And yet, according to a seemingly compensatory logic, Behn's translation works were almost immediately forgotten, whereas Carter's fame as the celebrated translator of Epictetus continued to circulate well into the nineteenth century.

Prefaces to translations offered a space for women to find their public voices and develop new means of self-expression in the early modern period. The best example is probably Margaret Tyler's preface to her translation from the Spanish of a romance by Diego Ortuñiez de Calahorra, entitled *A Mirrour of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (1578).[8] This work is remarkable for being one of the earliest feminist manifestos in England. Krontiris points out that Tyler was probably the first woman writer to denounce the inhibiting effects of the patriarchal divisions of genre and gender on female literary expression (p. 45). At the time her own explicit transgression of the unspoken rule which allowed women to translate only works of a religious nature was perceived as a sheer innovation.

In her preface Tyler sets out to justify women's right to deal with secular literature. Although the battle scenes and the violence described by chivalric romances were arguably outside feminine experience, Tyler claims that women were nevertheless familiar with these

[7] *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 23. See especially her discussion of Ian Watt's work on the birth of the novel (pp. 7-12).

[8] As Krontiris points out, Tyler's work helped to establish the practice of translating romance directly from the original language and made this genre popular in England (p. 45).

motives, at least on a purely literary level. In fact they were often designated as the addressees of courtly romances, which were usually dedicated to them by male authors. Hence, Tyler reasonably concludes, if women were allowed to read these kind of texts, then they should also be permitted to translate them:

And if men may and do bestow such of their travailes upon Gentlewomen, then may we women read such of their workes as they dedicate unto us, and if we may read them, why not farther wade in them to search of a truth. And then much more why not deale by translation in such arguments, especially this kind of exercise, being a matter of more heede then of deep invention or exquisite learning.[9]

Tyler's stress on the secondary nature of translation *vis-à-vis* original writing is especially significant in her attempt at claiming such activity as a safe territory for women.

A century later another 'translatress', Aphra Behn (1640-89), no longer felt compelled to emphasize the marginal status of translation.'[10] On the contrary, the preface to her version from the French of Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Entretiens Sur La Pluralité des Mondes* is confidently entitled 'Essay on Translated Prose', and boldly compared to the essay by the

---

[9] *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799*, ed. by Moira Ferguson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 56.

[10] Behn wanted to make explicit the gender of the translator by defining herself as 'translatress'. In her translation of Abraham Cowley's *Six Books of Plants* (1689), Book VI, she inserted a passage, marked by an annotation on the margin: 'the translatress in her own person speaks'. The passage refers to the subject of female authorship: Behn addresses the laurel with the following words:

I by a double right the Bounties claim,
Both from my Sex, and in *Apollo's* Name:
Let me with *Sappho* and *Orinda* be
Oh ever sacred Nymph, adorn'd by thee;
And give my Verses Immortality.

See Elizabeth Spearing, 'Aphra Behn: the Politics of Translation', in *Aphra Behn Studies*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 154-77 (p. 174).

Earl of Roscommon on the translation of poetry.[11]

In the seventeenth century translation was a prestigious activity in England: this is confirmed by the fact that leading literary figures of the time, such as John Dryden, devoted a large part of their time to this activity. Furthermore, this period saw the publication of influential commentaries on the theoretical aspects of translation: Dryden's preface to *Ovid's Epistles* appeared in 1680 and the Earl of Roscommon's *Essay on Translated Verse* in 1685. As Simon points out, the translation of texts from antiquity was considered as a necessary complement to original literary production: 'The overlapping literary functions of translation and creative writing result from the neo-classical valorization of the arts of imitation' (p. 53). However, women did not derive much benefit from such an improved consideration of translation: the prestigious versions from Latin and Greek were still a male-dominated area because women did not usually have access to classical languages. In fact women's efforts were confined to translation from contemporary European languages, especially French, German, and Italian. Therefore, female translation was still held captive by the laws of genre and gender in the late seventeenth century.

Aphra Behn's translation of Fontenelle is unusual for her time because it deals with the subject of empirical science, or natural philosophy as it was known at the time, which was still taboo for the female sex.[12] The French original presented itself as a simplified version of the Copernican system, consisting of dialogues between a male philosopher and a marchioness.

Unaccustomed as she was to the conventional topos of modesty frequently used by women writers, Behn does apologize for her scant familiarity with scientific subjects in this case. In her dedication to the Earl of Drumlangrig she begs pardon for her work's lack of accuracy: 'If it is not done with that exactness it merits, I hope your Lordship will pardon it

---

[11] *The Discovery of New Worlds* (1688), repr. in *Histories, Novels and Translations, Written by the most Ingenious Mrs BEHN* (1700).

[12] The Duchess of Newcastle, one of the few women amateurs who dared to publish her poems on scientific subjects, was ridiculed for her unusual interest in science in Thomas Wright's play *Female Vertuoso's* (1693). See Todd, *Angellica*, pp. 24-25.

in a *Woman,* who is not supposed to be well versed in the Terms of Philosophy, being but a new beginner in that Science."[13]

In her preface, Behn explains the reasons which brought her to select Fontenelle's text for translation. Market considerations are given a primary role: *Entretiens* had been successfully received both in its country of origin and in England in the original version and furthermore the reputation of the author was perceived as a guarantee for this literary enterprise. Yet other aspects of the French text which had attracted her interest are especially significant, as they allow us a glimpse into Behn's early feminist view of literature. She points out that Fontenelle's use of French in his treatise was a daring novelty at a time when Latin was still the dominant language for science. Obviously French was more accessible than Latin to female readers. Moreover, and even more unusually, Fontenelle had introduced a woman as one of the central characters of his dialogues. As Simon points out, Behn seems to be echoing the argument of her predecessor Tyler when she claims that 'an English Woman might adventure to translate any thing, a French Woman may be supposed to have spoken' (p. 73). The fact that a female character had been introduced into a male writer's text seems to become an invitation for Behn to voice her identity as a woman translator.

By stressing the novelty factor in Fontenelle's text, Behn manages to draw attention to the stumbling blocks against women's involvement in literature, either as consumers or producers. Not only does translation offer her the opportunity to contribute to the dissemination of progressive ideas, but it also helps her to participate in the discussion on subjects such as science and philosophy to which she was denied access as a female writer. For example, Fontenelle's translation gave Behn the chance to comment upon the theoretical aspects of translation and enter into the seventeenth-century debate on the nature of language.

She argues that French and English are extremely different languages and therefore it is particularly difficult to translate from one into the other. This was not the case with English and Italian, for example, because she claims that both of them were directly derived

[13] Aphra Behn, 'Essay on Translated Prose' *A Discovery of New Worlds*, in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. by Janet Todd, 6 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993), IV, 73-86 (p. 72).

from Latin. Nowadays it seems hardly possible to draw a distinction of this kind between two Romance languages such as Italian and French; Behn was probably influenced on this issue by the strong anti-French prejudices of her age. In spite of the fact that some of her linguistic notions are evidently inaccurate, the translator's interest in the non-symmetrical nature of languages seems to provide a scholarly basis for the discussion of her work.[14] Her main insight concerns the 'Genius' of the Nation, a concept to be developed by Romantic aesthetics more than a century later. Behn points out that 'the nearer the Genious and Humour of two Nations agree, the Idioms of their Speech are the nearer' (p. 74), thus revealing a precocious perception of the phenomena of translation as culturally-determined, rather than purely linguistic.

Behn's understanding of the complex cultural aspect of translation is manifested also by her attention to the different rhetorical conventions in English and French. She claims that French, unlike English, is characterized by a large use of 'Repetitions and Tautologies' (p. 76), whose main effect is that of generating confusion. Yet she does not advocate a strategy of naturalization which would obliterate the peculiar nature of the text. Instead, she suggests a way between the two extremes of literal and free translation, a practice similar to Dryden's balanced 'paraphrase', which aims at the faithful reproduction of the sense and 'character' of the original.[15] However, unlike Dryden, whose translation thinking was mainly grounded on purely linguistic notions, Behn's strategies were based upon an early perception of cultural identity, as clearly appears from her statements concerning the translation of the peculiarly elaborate French style:

If one endeavours to make it *English* Standard, it is no Translation. If one follows their Flourishes and Embroideries, it is worse than *French* Tinsel. But these defects are only

[14] On this subject, see Simon, p. 57.

[15] In his preface to *Ovid*'*s Epistles* (168o) Dryden had described the activity of translation by using three well-known categories: metaphrase (word for word translation), paraphrase (sense for sense translation), and imitation (the translator could alter the original to make it conform to the target-culture conventions). Extracts of Dryden's preface have been reprinted in André Lefevere, *Translation/History/ Culture: A Sourcebook* (London, Routledge, 1992), pp. 102-05.

comparatively, in respect of *English:* and I do not say this so much, to condemn the *French,* as to praise our own Motlier-Tongue, for what we think a Deformity, they may think a Perfection. (p. 76)

In the final part of her essay, Behn concentrates on a detailed criticism of Fontenelle's text. The main objection she raises to the French work is that it lacks coherence. She acknowledges the importance of Fontenelle's efforts to make scientific subjects more accessible to a wide readership by using a familiar language in his treatise. The French author is in fact addressing an audience which would not otherwise have partaken of the recent scientific developments. It is precisely for this purpose that the marchioness is introduced as one of the central characters: the French text is addressed to a category of readers traditionally deprived of the benefits of education, who could be properly represented by the metaphor of women's cultural exclusion. The marchioness herself embodies the ideal readers of the text: like them, she lacks even the basic notions of science.

Reflecting upon the impact his text was going to have on female readers, Fontenelle asked himself whether his portrait of a fictitious female character could encourage real women to undertake the study of philosophy:

In this Discourse I have introduced a fair Lady to be instructed in Philosophy, which, till now, never heard any speak of it; imagining, by this Fiction, I shall render my Work more agreeable, and to encourage the fair Sex [...] by the Example of a Lady who had no supernatural Character, and who never goes beyond the Bounds of a Person who has no Tincture of Learning, and yet understands all that is told her, and retains all the notions of *Tourbillions* and Worlds, without Confusion: And why should this imaginary Lady have the Precedency of all the rest of her delicate Sex? Or do they believe they are not as capable as conceiving that which she learned with so much Facility?[16]

However, the exploitative use of the image of woman, who is merely a symbol of the wider dissemination of science advocated by the author, is clearly perceived by Behn. She

[16] 'The Author's Preface', in Todd, *Works of Aphra Behn*, pp. 87-91 (pp. 88-89).

points out that Fontenelle is pushing his argument too far: by aiming to entertain his readers as well as to instruct them, he creates an excessively colloquial style which threatens to make his subject sound ridiculous. Furthermore, the character of his marchioness is not convincing: 'He makes her say a great many very silly things, tho' sometimes she makes Observations so learned, that the greatest Philosophers in Europe could make no better' (p. 77).

Behn's translation of Fontenelle is extremely literal, as Behn herself makes clear in her preface.[17] She limits her interventions into the text to the few announced in her preface. The most significant is the correction of a mistake made by the author, who had pronounced the depth of the atmosphere of the Earth to be twenty or thirty leagues, rather than two or three, as the translator points out on the basis of authority of philosophers such as Descartes and Rohalt. The intention to respect the character of the original is reaffirmed in the very last lines of her preface, in which she points out the difference between the art of imitation and that of translation, which were often treated as interchangeable in the seventeenth century. Behn announces to her readers that what she is providing them with is a translation: 'And I resolv'd either to give you the *French* Book into *English,* or to give you the subject quite changed and made my own; but having neither health nor leisure for the last I offer you the first such as it is' (p. 86).

Behn's success as the first professional woman writer marked a significant stage in the development of a female literary tradition. Her desire for a large readership and her reflections on the position of women in her society were bound to exert a strong influence on her successors. From the late seventeenth century onwards women began to acquire a commercial as well as a literary role, and consequently gained a new visibility. Yet Jeslyn Medoff speaks of an 'Inglorious Revolution' for women writers in her analysis of the complex changes affecting their works between the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth.[18] Such a definition applies to the complex transformations

[17] She points out that she has 'translated the Book near the Words of the Author' (p. 86).

[18] 'The Daughters of Behn', in *Women, Writing, History,* ed. by Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (London: Batsford, 1992), pp. 33-54 (p. 33).

occurring after Behn's death. Medoff highlights the consequences of this event on other female writers:

> Women writers who followed in her wake would have to make conscious decisions about accepting, rejecting or refashioning her precedents, not only in style and subject matter but in the personae of their writings, in the personae they, as authors, would assume in public (in formal letters, prefaces, dedications and the like), and in the way they tried to control their reputations as women, which were essentially inseparable from their reputations as writers. (pp. 34-35)

The process of reassessment of Behn's literary legacy started as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century. After her death in 1689 her reputation declined rapidly and at the turn of the century her career was a notorious example used in order to intimidate, rather than encourage prospective women writers. The most evident case was that of Dryden, who, after having praised Behn's translation of Ovid's 'Oenone to Paris' in 1680, turned abruptly against her, defining both her conduct and her writing as immoral twenty years later.[19]

Such a rapid decline in the reputation of Behn was the effect of a complex redefinition of writing which was taking place at various levels in the post-Restoration period. Jane Spencer has called attention to the new emphasis on three terms in early-eighteenth-century literature, 'nature, morality and modesty', a concern which will increase later on in the century, during the 'age of sensibility'.[20] A parallel between literature and femininity started to emerge soon after Behn's death. The notion of woman's special nature gradually took over from the Aristotelian hierarchical vision (which saw women as similar in kind but inferior in degree to men) by positing an essential difference between the two sexes. The nineteenth century was to conceive the theory of the two separate spheres, the public and the private domains respectively, for the two sexes. In the meantime, in the eighteenth century the

---

[19] Medoff quotes Dryden's letter to the young poet Elizabeth Thomas, written shortly before his death in 1700. He writes: 'Avoid [. . .] the Licenses which Mrs Behn allowed her self, of writing loosely, and giving (if I may have leave to say so) some Scandal to the Modesty of her Sex' (p. 33).

[20] *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 77.

already mentioned conflation between literature and femininity helped to define the former as separated from the public, political field. Spencer points out that consequently literature was supposed to exert only an indirect influence on the world, in much the same way as women were assumed to do (p. xi). Literature became gradually detached from social life and transformed into a kind of fetish, in a process which appeared to match the deep transformation of women's status. Terry Eagleton argues that the emergence of individualism and the growth of Protestant ideology–the hallmarks of an unfolding middle class–encouraged a new 'turn to the subject' and an introspective attitude which appeared to resemble traditional feminine qualities.[21] As a result, women acquired a more prominent position in the literary field in the course of the eighteenth century. However, female ventures into the public sphere had to be negotiated on new and more restrictive terms. Women's writing was gradually confined to the representation of certain themes, which were essentially restricted to the realm of privacy. As Spencer points out, women's literary success went hand in hand with the suppression of many forms of feminist opposition (p. xi).

According to Ballaster, two diametrically opposed feminine traditions were confronting each other at the beginning of the eighteenth century:

The early eighteenth century, then, saw a split between female-authored pious and didactic love fiction, stressing the virtues of chastity and sentimental marriage, and erotic fiction by women, with its voyeuristic attention to the combined pleasures and ravages of seduction. (p. 33)

Ballaster argues that the new moral tone in literature is best represented by the fiction of women writers such as Elizabeth Rowe (1674-1737), Penelope Aubin (1679-1731), and Jane Barker (1688-1726). At first sight arranging these writers into a unique and homogeneous tradition might appear problematic, as they were neither strictly contemporary nor did they produce works belonging to the same genres. Yet the thin but concrete thread which unites them is clearly visible in both the overly didactic tone of their prose and the care they took in maintaining an unblemished reputation. In the early eighteenth century

---

[21] Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), pp. 13-17.

women writers turned definitely away from the discredited image of Behn and took inspiration from the life and work of Elizabeth Rowe.[22]

The poet and translator Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806) was one of Rowe's symbolic daughters. A revised version of her poem 'On the Death of Mrs Rowe' (1737) was prefixed to the edition of the *Miscellaneous Works* of Rowe.[23] Carter celebrates her as a champion of her sex, the moral woman poet whose works and reputation eventually came to rescue women's poetical efforts from the dominating influence of her unprincipled predecessors. Women writing before Rowe had misused the gifts they had received from their Muse by producing a corrupted kind of art. Female poetry finds its true vocation only after the appearance of Rowe on the literary scene:

> The Muse, for vices not her own accus'd,
> With blushes view'd her sacred gifts abus'd;
> Those gifts for nobler purposes assign'd,
> To raise the thoughts, and moralize the mind.[24]

With her emphasis on religious experience, Rowe represented a kind of role-model for the younger Carter, who was ready to accept the restrictive principles of modest femininity embodied by her predecessor. In the final lines of her poem, Carter expresses her desire to follow Rowe in developing an unfolding tradition of 'moral' poetry by women:

> Fixt on my soul shall thy example grow,

[22] Rowe seems best to represent the eighteenth-century ideals of feminine and literary virtue. After the untimely death of her husband, she retired to a life of perfect solitude. Her literary production is characterized by a strong religious vein, particularly her epistolary work *Friendship in Death, or Letters from the Dead to the Living* (1728).

[23] The earliest version of this poem had appeared in the pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine,* 8, (April 1737). The revised version was also printed in the same periodical two years later.

[24] Elizabeth Carter, 'On the Death of Mrs Rowe', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 8 (March 1739), 152.

And be my genius and my guide below;
To this I'll point my first, my noblest views,
Thy spotless verse shall regulate my Muse. (p. 152)

In 1738 Edward Cave, publisher of the well-known periodical the *Gentleman's Magazine,* commissioned Carter to translate a text by Francesco Algarotti, which appeared in Italian in 1737 under the title *Il Newtonianismo per le dame: ovvero Dialoghi sopra la luce e il colore.*[25] This text had met with an enormous success in Italy, where it was printed in four editions and translated into three languages during the author's lifetime. According to Rupert Hall, *Il Newtonianismo* eventually went through thirty-one editions and was translated into English, French, German, Dutch, Swedish, and Portuguese.[26] The first edition was dedicated to Fontenelle, from whom the Italian author had borrowed the structure of the text, which consisted of a series of dialogues between a male philosopher and a lady. In this case the purpose of the text was to popularize Newton's scientific discoveries, particularly in the field of optics.

Between 1738 and 1739 Carter worked on the translation of the Italian text, which was published in May 1739. The name of the translator was not printed in the frontispiece, and she did not write any preface to her work. However, she was widely known to have been responsible for the English text. In June the *Gentleman's Magazine* published a poem

[25] Algarotti was a member of the Venetian nobility and his interest in Newton's philosophy had brought him in touch with fellows of the Royal Society in Rome, such as Martin Folkes who had encouraged him to complete his work. In 1734, during the first of his visits to London, he was himself elected member of the Royal Society, and it was probably on that occasion that he met Thomas Birch, one of the commissioners of Carter's translation.

[26] Rupert Hall, 'La matematica, Newton, e la letteratura' in *Scienza e letteratura nella cultura italiana del Settecento,* ed by Renzo Cremante and Walter Tega (Bologna: Mulino, 1984), pp. 29-46 (p. 37). The remarkable fame of this work is linked with the peculiar circumstances of its reception in Italy: it was included in the *Index librorum prohibitorum* by the ecclesiastical authorities in Rome in 1739. It is reasonable to assume that news about this ban would have aroused the curiosity of the English public, generally hostile to Catholic opinion in that period. Yet no mention of this fact has been found in any of the responses to Carter's translation, including reviews in the literary periodicals of the time.

dedicated to 'Miss Carter', praising her translation of Algarotti. The work was acclaimed as a significant novelty, a simplified version of Newton's philosophy which offered women a palatable version of science:

> Now may the *British* fair, with *Newton,* soar
> To worlds remote, and range all nature o er;
> Of motion learn the late discover'd cause,
> and beauteous fitness of its settled laws.[27]

The role of the translator was emphasized as she was considered responsible for making science accessible to her countrywomen. In a way, translator and original author were seen as one and the same person, joined by their common intention of furthering women's education,

Thomas Birch, a friend of Carter and one of the principal patrons of the work, also drew attention to the combination of two elements: the essay's targeting of a female public and the fact that the translation had been produced by a woman. In his long review of the translation published in the *History of the Works of the Learned* he wrote:

The *English* Translation has this remarkable Circumstance to recommend it to the Curiosity of the Public, as the Excellence of it will to the Approbation of all good Judges, that as the Work itself is design'd for the Use of the Ladies, it is now render'd into our Language, and illustrated with several curious Notes, by a young Lady, Daughter of Dr *Nicholas Carter,* of *Deal* in Kent.[28]

A few months after the publication of the translation, Carter sent a copy of it to Mrs

[27] J. Swan, 'To Miss Carter: On her translation of Sir ISAAC NEWTON'S Philosophy Explain'd for the Use of the Ladies, from the Italian of SIG. ALGAROTTI', *Gentleman's Magazine,* 9 (June 1739), 322.

[28] Thomas Birch, 'Article XXXI', *The History of the Works of the Learned,* (June 1739), pp. 391-408. (pp. 393-94).

Rowe's brother, Theophilus Rowe.[29] In a letter to the translator, Rowe praised her work and highlighted the bond uniting translator and reader when they are of the same sex. Rowe considered this as a sure basis for a powerful and beneficial influence on female readers. Moreover, the translator was admired not only for the accuracy of her work, but also for her personal qualities: her grace and lightness of touch made her a model women should follow in order to achieve moral and intellectual improvement:

The public, and particularly the fair sex, are inexpressibly indebted to the translator, and will, I am persuaded, be sensible of their obligations. [. . .] I hope, Madam, the example you give, with how much grace and ease, wisdom and philosophy sit on a Lady, even in the bloom of youth and beauty, will allow your own charming part of the creation to imitate, as well as to admire you. (pp. 46-47)

The reasons inducing Cave to commission the translation *of Il Newtonianismo* are not immediately clear. Although scientific subjects were in great demand in the early popular press, translating a simplified version of Newton's *Optics,* which had already attracted a great deal of comment in England, might at first sight appear strange. Algarotti's appeal to a female audience and his apparent resolution to improve women's education seem to be the most plausible explanations for Cave's interest. However, a careful reading of *Il Newtonianismo* reveals that its appeal to ladies was in fact only a formal, decorative element in the structure of the work. It is not clear whether Cave (or Birch, who was in touch with the original author) clearly understood the extent of Algarotti's actual commitment to the improvement of female education. But even more intriguing questions are raised by the exceptional success of Carter's translation, which was published in four editions in the eighteenth century.[30]

---

[29] For an account of this circusmtance see Montagu Pennington's *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs Elizabeth Carter* (London, 1807), pp. 46-47.

[30] Carter's translation was reprinted in 1742, 1765, and 1772 with the following titles respectively: *Sir Isaac Newton's Theory of Light and Colours,* 2 vols (London, 1742), *The Philosophy of Sir Isaac .Newton.* (Glasgow, 1765), and *The Lady's Philosophy: or Sir Isaac Newton's Theory of Light and Colours* (London, 1772).

In spite of the fact that handbooks for women touched upon many subjects in this period, from health to literature and from art to economics, they carefully avoided scientific areas. Thus, an introduction to the system of thought of the most celebrated among English philosophers, in a text specifically addressed to a female readership, was bound to be perceived as a radical novelty in England in the mid-eighteenth century.

To return to the Italian original, it would be simplistic to present the strong impact of *Il Newtonianismo* on Italian culture, confirmed by its many reprints, as the mere effect of a successful popularization of scientific discoveries. Over and above this, the dissemination of scientific ideas became a pretext for the author to denounce the stagnant nature of the Italian society of the period. The experimental method perfected by Newton was, according to Algarotti, the final result of a socio-cultural revolution set in motion by the English school of philosophy, which he considered highly innovative in comparison with the scholastic, authoritative tradition still reigning in Italy at the time. The liberating effects of the empirical tradition, which had bestowed on the individual the key to knowledge, was readily acknowledged by Algarotti, who aimed at transposing the scientific revolution brought about by Newton's theories to the social field. Algarotti points out that the most radical effect of the new English epistemology could be observed in its application to the field of politics: the extraordinary result of this was a form of government which was not the product of abstract speculation, but rather a combination between the material needs of the people and the authority of the ruling classes.[31]

The style and language of Algarotti's essay cannot be considered in isolation from its reformist purpose. The author's resolution to write a scientific treatise in Italian (or, rather, in what was still in the process of becoming a national language) must have been perceived

---

[31] See this example taken from Carter's translation of Algarotti: 'Not to say any Thing further of Natural Philosophy, which seems a Province the most adapted to the Discoveries of Observations, is not Politics indebted to these for that wise and real Government, which renders the Southern Suns less pleasing than the Cloudy Regions of the North, where the Liberty of the People is made compatible with the Superiority of the Nobles, and the Authority of the Sovereign?' (Francesco Algarotti, *Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy Exp1ain'd for the Use of the Ladies,* 2 vols (London, 1739), II, 17).

as a daring innovation. Such an undertaking was also a precise indication of the fact that the author was trying to appeal to a readership far wider than the circle of cultivated readers who could read Newton's work in its original language. Algarotti was in fact addressing an extended audience, which was not supposed to be familiar even with the basic notions of science. The function of his appeal to a female public was precisely the same as Fontenelle's some fifty years before: women were used as a kind of rhetorical device to represent the cultural exclusion of the ideal readers. And the style of the essay had to be adapted to their needs: a female readership could justify the elaborate literary style employed by the author, who aims at entertaining his readers as well as instructing them. To this end, Algarotti had to make the language of science less abstract by inserting images and 'figures of speech':

The abstruse Points, upon which I have been obliged to treat, were only such as are absolutely necessary, and always interspersed with something that may relieve the Mind from that Attention which they require. In the most delightful Walk we are sometimes glad to find a verdant Turf to repose ourselves upon. Lines and mathematical Figures are entirely excluded, as they would have given these Discourses too scientific an Air. (p. vi)

Il Newtonianismo was in fact far from recommended to a female readership. A1garotti's gallant style becomes at times rich in erotic allusions, which appear to create a masculine discourse relegating woman to her traditional position as object.

Carter's translation was to smooth down precisely these sexist ambiguities. If the appeal to female readers had to be taken literally, then a faithful translation of Algarotti's erotic language became impossible. The two principal strategies employed by the translator will be broadly defined as gender-induced and culture-induced manipulations. In order to transform *Il Newtonianismo* into a handbook for women, radical changes had to be made: not only had Algarotti's peculiar misogynist traits to be omitted, but also his social reforming purpose had to be revised.

Carter's principal strategy was to modify the original author's representation of the female body. Eighteenth-century translation norms were of substantial aid to her in this case, as they prescribed that the notions of grace and delicacy must always prevail, even at the cost

of betraying the original text.[32] Therefore, the translator did not have to worry if her compliance with the rigid codes of femininity of her time compelled her to neglect some aspects of the original. On the contrary, her strategy had the convenient effect of rendering the appeal to a female public more plausible than it was in Algarotti's text. Thus, Carter systematically omitted all the libertine images employed by the Italian author, the best example of this being Algarotti's description of semen in a passage referring to the minute worlds discovered after the invention of the microscope, which is simply eliminated in the translation.

Carter also avoided translating those gallantries of Algarotti's which, exceeding their limits, became eroticism of a clearly misogynist nature. For example, she left out the original author's *double entendre* in the passage in which he explains the phenomenon of the refraction of light by using the image of the Marchioness in her bathroom. Paradoxically, her version seems to acquire greater scientific rigour when set against the original:

Ecco una cosa, m'interrupp'ella, che io non a molto, essendo nel bagno, osservai attentamente, che mi sorprese, e di cui m'inquietava la ragione. Altro ella non è, soggiuns'io, che la rifrazione che soffrono i raggi passando dall'acqua nell'aria. Egli sarebbe una buona cosa lo spiegarvene minutamente gli effetti, e gli scherzi sul margine del vostro bagno. Sapete voi quanti curiosi d'Ottica fareste?[33]

This is the very Thing, said she, interrupting me, that I lately observed when I was in the Bath, and I was extremely surprised and puzzled to find out the Reason of it. It is nothing

---

[32] This practice was justified by Alexander Fraser Tytler in his *Essays on the Principles of Translation* (1791), when he claimed that suppression was allowed when the original text displayed concepts or images which went against contemporary notions of decorum. For example see the following passage: 'If a translator is bound, in general, to adhere with fidelity to the matters of the age and country to which his original belongs, there are some instances in which he will find it necessary to make a slight sacrifice to the manners of his modern readers. The ancients, in the expression of resentment or contempt, made use of many epithets and appellations which sound extremely shocking to our more polished ears' *Essays on the Principles of Translation,* ed. by J. F. Huntsman (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1978), p. 271.

[33] Algarotti, *Il Newtonianismo*, p. 118.

else, answered I, but the Refraction which the Rays suffer in passing from Air into Water.[34]

Another kind of textual intervention was also necessary, in order to turn a radically political text into a popularization of scientific topics specifically addressed to women: the original text's longings for socio-political change were systematically eliminated in the English translation. Unlike gender-induced manipulation, the translator's alterations of the socio-cultural aspects ofAlgarotti's text do not seem to be the result of a deliberate strategy. Some of them appear rather to be the effect of Carter's lack of familiarity with the socio-historical conditions of the geographical area known as 'Italy' in those days. This becomes especially clear when Carter translates a passage in which Algarotti denounces the backward state of Italian culture in comparison with contemporary European dynamism. The intellectual ferment of the age of Enlightenment had not reached his country yet, but the author was looking forward to a more widespread circulation of ideas, which would soon put an end to this state of affairs. He hoped that the new knowledge of the Age of Realities' would eventually come to improve the social condition of Italian people. When Carter translates Algarotti's wish that the Enlightenment will eventually arrive 'una volta anco per noi' (literally meaning 'for us too, at last) as 'once more', she certainly demonstrates scant familiarity with the Italian language, but what is especially interesting here is that her version is diametrically opposed to Algarotti's principal argument, according to which the new ideas had not reached Italy yet. Here is the passage in Italian and then in translation:

Il Secolo delle cose vegna una volta anco per noi, e il sapere non ad irruvidir l'animo, o a piatire sopra una vecchia e disusata frase, ma a pulir serva, seè possibile, e ad abbellir la Società (p. xi)

Let the Age of Realities once more arise among us, and Knowledge instead of giving a rude and savage Turn to the Mind, and exciting endless Disputes and wrangling upon some obsolete Phrase, serve to polish and adorn Society. (I, xvi)

Although on a purely linguistic level Carter's version looks extremely literal, her

[34] Algarotti, *Sir Isaac Newton*'*s,* I, 119. Carter eliminates the following statements: "Twere a good thing to explain to you all the effects minutely on the rim of your bath. Do you know how much curiosity about Optics this would arouse?' [my translation].

translation strategies deeply altered the principal characteristics of the Italian text and deprived it of its reforming tension, which belonged with its socio-cultural setting. As a result, the translation became extremely different from its original.

Unlike Behn's translation at the end of the seventeenth century, Carter's work did not offer her any opportunity to express her gendered voice, nor did it appear to help her to develop a deep awareness of the theoretical aspects of translation. Rather, the English version of *Il Newtonianismo* seems to be primarily the product of commercial interests, which effectively transformed a radically political treatise into a manual for the education of women, one of the many handbooks which reached great popularity at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In order to ensure the success of the text, the image of the female translator was exploited by reviewers and critics. Carter was made to represent the readership to which the target text was addressed: in the eyes of the public she was the first woman to experience those benefits which Algarotti's text had made available to the female sex.

However, in the long run such a manipulative use of the female image paradoxically helped Carter to develop her own means of self-expression. Thanks to her friendship with other women, Carter established connections with influential public figures, who in turn helped her to publish her translation from the Greek *of All the Works of Epictetus* in 1758.[35] This time Carter not only put her name to her work, but also wrote a long introduction, in which she described her difficult task in giving new life to a culture which no longer existed. This work brought her extraordinary fame and social prestige, and as a celebrated learned woman she provided a role model for many young women in the eighteenth century.

These few examples of women's translation activity should serve to illustrate that the history of translation, like literary history, is not progressive. Behn's outspoken voice as a woman translator remained a solitary example for many years. Yet, even when historical circumstances and ideologies appeared to be particularly unpropitious for female self-

[35] In the 1740s Carter started a lifelong correspondence with her friend Catherine Talbot, who lived with the family of the Bishop of Oxford, Thomas Secker. In 1748 Talbot asked Carter to translate Epictetus's works for her personal use. Talbot soon decided to inform the Bishop of this project and he began to read and comment on the translation, which was eventually published in 1758. See Pennington, especially pp. 108-43.

expression, women’s voices were not totally suppressed. As we have seen, even Carter’s apparent compliance with the new ideology of femininity of the eighteenth century bore its fruits for the unfolding of a tradition of women translators. The linear development of history often gives place to the discontinuous but vibrant thread of genealogy when women’s production is taken into account.

Source : *The Yearbook of English Studies,* Vol. 28, 1998, p. 181-195.