

Bodmer and Breitinger  
by Helen Baumer

**JOHANN JACOB BODMER AND  
JOHANN JACOB BREITINGER:  
50 YEARS OF TEAMWORK**



**Johann Jacob Bodmer**

In 1779 the young Goethe visited the Zurich home of a little old man with grey eyebrows hanging down into his eyes.

Johann Jacob Bodmer (1698 - 1783) was a familiar sight in his dressing gown and slippers, a black silk cap perched on the high forehead above a large pointed nose. By then 81 years old, he had, to his great regret, outlived most of his friends. Even his great collaborator of over fifty years, Johann Jacob Breitinger (1701 - 1776), had gone. "[...] auch Breitinger ist nicht mehr," he had written in 1777/78,<sup>1</sup> "Der Mitdenker meiner Gedanken, der Gesellschafter meines Lebens, der Zeuge meiner Handlungen hat mich verlassen," ([...] even Breitinger no longer exists. The co-thinker of my thoughts, the companion of my life, the witness of my actions has left me).

Between them, Johann Jacob Bodmer and Johann Jacob Breitinger's literary publications, translations, theories and literary discoveries had helped to initiate significant changes in German literature and thought of the eighteenth century. Their collaboration was probably best known for the discovery, publication and propagation of the major works of Middle High German literature, including the *Manesse Liederhandschrift*, also known as the *Heidelberger Liederhandschrift*. But they also played a significant role in familiarising German-speaking Europe with English thought and literature, initiating a new approach to translation, and contributing to a change in the approach to creative literary expression in Germany

### River walks and numerous publications

Bodmer was born in 1698 in Greifensee, east of Zurich, while Breitinger was born just under three years later, in 1701 in Zurich. Both attended the Collegium Carolinum, the theologically-based academic school in Zurich. Bodmer later became Professor of Swiss history at the Collegium, while Breitinger became Professor of Hebrew, teaching logic, rhetoric and later Greek literature as well.

The collaboration between the two men began with a literary club, founded in 1720. Called the "Gesellschaft der Maler" (Society of Painters), it brought together a group of friends and former pupils at the Collegium Carolinum who decided to publish a literary publication based on the English *Spectator*. However, the reception of the publication was cool, the Zurich censor created difficulties and most members of the group soon lost enthusiasm. But Bodmer and Breitinger persisted, finally publishing 94 issues.

The two friends were to continue this close collaboration, each contributing prefaces to the other's works, and working closely together on the contents of each other's works. Examination of correspondence between the two reveals, for instance, that while he was engaged on his first translation of *Paradise Lost*, Bodmer continually sent Breitinger the drafts to read through. Later, Breitinger read his *Critische Dichtkunst* out loud to Bodmer, section for section, as it was being written. Much of this later discussion took place

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<sup>1</sup> from "Persönliche Anekdoten", quoted in Ernst, *Johann Jacob Bodmer, Ausgewählte Schriften*, p. 28 (my translation)

during their frequent walks along the Sihl River. In this collaboration, Breitinger can be regarded as having been the systematician, while Bodmer was the inventive and initiating spirit of the two. Breitinger had the thorough mastery of the classics while Bodmer was widely read in more modern literature.<sup>2</sup>

In the collaboration between the two friends, Breitinger's essay on the theory of translation held an important position, not only for Bodmer's translations — but also for the subsequent development of translation theory and practise in Germany in the eighteenth century.

### Breitinger on faithful translation

After Luther's "Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen" (Circular Letter on Translation) in 1530, the predominant approach to translation had been Germanisation (*Verdeutschen*) of texts, in other words, a translation approach which stressed closeness to everyday German. Breitinger's focus was different. For him, complete faithfulness to the original in terms of both content and form was paramount when translating. In his main exposition on the subject of translation, published in 1740, he wrote:

Die Uebersetzung ist ein Conterfey, das desto mehr Lob verdienet, je ähnlicher es ist. Darum muss ein Uebersetzer sich selber das harte Gesetze vorschreiben, dass er niemahls die Freyheit nehmen wolle, von der Grundschrift, weder in Ansehung der Gedancken, noch in der Form und Art derselben, abzuweichen.

(A translation is a likeness; the more similar it is, the more praise it merits. For this reason a translator must set himself the hard task of never allowing himself the freedom of deviating from the basic text, neither as regards the thoughts, nor in the form and nature of this text.)<sup>3</sup>

His reason for advocating faithfulness was that the translation should have not only the same impact on its German readers as the original, but it should have this impact in the same order and using the same images. If the translator ever found it necessary to deviate from his original it was his duty to provide notes explaining why he had done so. "Ich fodere hiemit eine Rechenschaft von ihm," (I hereby demand accountability of him), he wrote.<sup>4</sup> Taking Bodmer's translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as his example — the translation that was soon to become the focal point of a fierce literary controversy amongst the German-speaking intelligentsia — he explained:

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<sup>2</sup> most of this biographical information is based on Hans and Hermann Bodmer, "J.J. Bodmer, sein Leben und seine Werke" and Wolfgang Bender, "Nachwort" to *Johann Jacob Breitinger, Critische Dichtkunst, Faksimiledruck nach der Ausgabe von 1740*

<sup>3</sup> "Von der Kunst der Uebersetzung" (On the Art of Translation), in Johann Jacob Breitinger's *Critische Dichtkunst*, 1740, p.139 (my translation)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 173 (my translation)

Milton muss uns in der Uebersetzung eben dieselben erhabenen und verwundersamen Bildnisse und Schildereyen, in eben der Ordnung, wie in dem Originale, vorstellen, [...]

(In the translation, Milton must present to us just the same sublime and amazing images and portrayals, in just the same order as in the original [...])<sup>5</sup>

After Breitinger, this new theoretical approach to translation was to be pursued further by Johann Gottfried Herder and later put into practice in a consistent manner in the highly admired and influential Homer translations of Johann Heinrich Voss (1751 - 1826), a translator who systematically emulated Homeric linguistic and stylistic elements. The Voss translation of Homer was so conscientiously faithful to its original that it has been described as approaching an interlinear version, and it was long regarded as the unmatched masterwork of German translation.

Breitinger saw good translations as an enrichment for their target language, and hoped that responsibility on the part of translators would spare the world a whole host of bad translations. He believed that the translators' job was no easy task, and had high expectations with regard to translators' abilities and qualifications. He required, first of all, that translators should demonstrate good taste in selecting which texts they translated. Further they should have a good command of the language from which they wished to translate, and be very familiar with the original author's work, having "a sufficient and clear insight into the perfection of the original". Finally translators should be in a position to give precise information and answers on "the nature, power and necessity" of the works and images translated.<sup>6</sup>

The actual process of translation was treated in a somewhat contradictory manner in Breitinger's essay. On the one hand he began by presenting a rather mechanistic view of languages as being merely collections of words and sayings equivalent to similar collections in other languages, and therefore interchangeable. For this reason, translation simply required replacement of the terms in one language by those in another.<sup>7</sup> Later, however, he pointed out that each language has its own special character resulting from different ways of living and different customs, and varying dispositions and ways of thinking. This gave rise to "idiotisms" — either words and sayings that cannot simply be transposed from one language to another but have to be explained by a translator,<sup>8</sup> or grammatical characteristics such as, in German, noun-creation, composita and the use of participles.

### **Bodmer's two-pronged approach to translation**

Like Breitinger, Bodmer also advocated precise reproduction of the original text in translation. However, even in his theoretical writings he recognised some limitations to

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 139 - 40 (my translation)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 142

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 138 - 39

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143 - 44

this. For instance, he noted how in some of the original texts he was working from, the authors had enriched their texts with words from a variety of dialects (Homer, Milton), taken powerful ancient words, created new ones or discovered unusual metaphors (all Milton), and he bemoaned the "sensitivity" of his times which made it impossible for him to allow such boldness in his translation.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, he recognised a need for clarity in his translated texts, a requirement which could often conflict with the postulate of faithfulness in translation. The degree to which these pragmatic considerations caused him to depart from Breitinger's requirements of faithfulness will become evident later, when we examine his practical translation activity.

Like Breitinger, Bodmer recognised the degree to which language is affected by the different customs and images of the different nations. By way of example, in his 1746 essay, "Von der erforderen Genauigkeit bey dem Uebersetzen", he mentioned the English character, which he described as masculine and magnanimous, and which he found reflected in the English language, along with many figurative expressions featuring blood, death and so on, which resulted from familiarity with images of death and fighting:

Jedermann bewundert an der Englischen Nation ein männliches, grossmüthiges Wesen, welches ihr besonder ist, und sich auch in ihrer Sprache äussert. Warum diese so viele figürliche Redensarten vom Blut, Metzlung, Tod ec, hergenommen habe, lässt sich ja leicht schliessen, weil sie durch die [...] vielen Menschen- und Thier-Gefechte, die sie von Jugend auf vor sich sehen, gewöhnliche und bequeme Begriffe von diesen Sachen bekommen, die doch von andern Völckern verabscheuet werden.<sup>10</sup>

The difficulty which such characteristic linguistic features posed to a translator had been noted but not solved by Breitinger. Later in his essay Bodmer proposed a two-pronged approach, by which the translator had the choice of either a translation focusing on simple communication of content or a faithful translation:

[...] ist die Absicht, die in der Urschrift enthaltene Materie in einer andern Sprache der Welt einfältig mitzuthellen, so liegt dem Uebersetzer ja ob, alles auf das klare und deutlichste nach dem Genius seiner Sprache vorzutragen: Will man aber eine genaue Uebersetzung haben, die nicht nur die Gedancken der Urschrift vorlege, sondern auch alle die Arten und Weisen, die der Urheber gebraucht, seine Gedancken an den Tag zu geben, beybehalte, so muss auch solches ganz genau bewerkstelliget werden [...]

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<sup>9</sup> See "Schwierigkeiten, den Homer zu verdeutschen", reproduced in Fritz Ernst, *Johann Jacob Bodmer, Ausgewählte Schriften*, p. 54, and "Nachrichten von Miltons Verlust des Paradieses", reproduced in Volker Meid, *Johann Jakob Bodmer. Johann Jakob Breitinger. Schriften zur Literatur*, p. 46

<sup>10</sup> "Von der erforderen Genauigkeit bey dem Uebersetzen" (On the Requisite Exactness in Translation), in Johann Jacob Bodmer and Johann Jacob Breitinger, *Der Mahler der Sitten, zweiter Band*, p. 515 - 16

([...] if the intention is to communicate the material contained in the original text into another language of the world in a simple manner, it is the duty of the translator to present everything in the clearest manner in accordance with the nature of his language. However, if a precise translation is wanted that presents not only the thoughts of the original text but also retains the entire manner used by the originator to reveal his thoughts, then this needs to be managed absolutely precisely [...])<sup>11</sup>

It is thought unlikely that Bodmer realised the full implications of this two-pronged approach<sup>12</sup>; this did not occur until later in the century, with Goethe and Schleiermacher. In his famous treatise "Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens" (1813), Friedrich Schleiermacher also proposed the use of a two-pronged approach. However, while Bodmer had differentiated between different translation intentions on the part of the translator in determining which approach was to be used, Schleiermacher developed this much further, advocating a "foreignisation" (completely faithful) approach for poetic and philosophical works, and Germanisation for texts used in business life.

Clearly, the translation practitioner, Bodmer, displayed a greater degree of pragmatism in his approach to translation theory than did his systematic colleague, Breitinger. Nevertheless, both Swiss clearly placed their theoretical emphasis on faithful translation of texts. In doing so, they are thought to have been the first thinkers in German intellectual history to have diverted attention away from *what* foreign writers wrote to *how* they wrote it in their original languages.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, this approach was not only new but also in clear conflict with the work of the other leading translation theoretician of the time, Johann Christoph Gottsched, who advocated a more traditional approach to translation whereby the translation was to be adapted as much as possible to the German language.<sup>14</sup>

### Milton's "sublime" *Paradise Lost*

Bodmer's choice of texts for translation was also new, focusing on works of extended imaginative creation outside the realms of rationally observable phenomena. This was closely bound up with Bodmer and Breitinger's general approach to literature and conflicted heavily with the rationalist approach of the Leipzig school centred on Gottsched. Bodmer's main translation work, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in particular, was to become the centre of the bitter controversy over what kind of material was suitable for literary endeavour. Eventually Swiss arguments won the day, paving the way for change in the character of German literary works.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 521 (my translation)

<sup>12</sup> see for instance Gerd Plückebaum, "Von der erforderten Genauigkeit beym Uebersetzen. Ein Beitrag Bodmers zur Übersetzungstheorie in XVIII. Jahrhundert."

<sup>13</sup> claim made by Plückebaum, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> on Gottsched see, for instance, Thomas Huber, *Studien zur Theorie des Übersetzens im Zeitalter der deutschen Aufklärung 1730 - 1770*, Meisenheim am Glan 1968, chapter I

Bodmer's source language was also an unusual choice for the time, for he translated mainly from English whose language and literature were known, if at all, through the medium of French. During the course of his life he prepared six different translations of *Paradise Lost*, as well as a translation of part of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*, and some of Thomas Percy's *Reliques* or old English ballads. As an older man he also completed a translation of Homer's works from Greek.

The greatest translation work of Bodmer's life was his German *Paradise Lost*, which appeared in six different versions over a period of 50 years, the first translation being published in 1732, with revised translations following in 1742, 1754, 1759, 1769 and 1780. John Milton's English epic had originally been published in 1667, more than 50 years before the young Bodmer translated it. Written in blank verse, it recounts man's fall from perfection into a state of human reality, featuring characters that include God, the archangels and angels, Satan, Adam and Eve. In addition to its Biblical material and references, it also contains numerous references to classical mythology. For Bodmer, Milton's concern in this work was not so much theological but rather to move people's hearts and stir their emotions:

[...] durch wohlerfundene und lehrreiche Schildereyen die Phantasie des Lesers angenehm einzunehmen, und sich seines Gemühtes zu bemächtigen [...]

([...] to win the reader's imagination in a pleasant manner through well-fabricated and educational portrayals and to take control of his emotions [...])<sup>15</sup>

Compared with the familiar literature of the Enlightenment, the language used in this work was new, unfamiliar and exciting (or upsetting, depending on the individual point of view). It was this unaccustomed use of language, together with Milton's daring project of presenting events beyond rational comprehension, that captured Bodmer's imagination. Full of enthusiasm, he described it as "einen grossen heiligen, den denkbar höchsten epischen Stoff, der zugleich vom Geist des Altertums durchdrungen war" (a great religious work and the highest epic material imaginable, simultaneously penetrated with the spirit of antiquity), and featuring bold imagination, sublimity of emotion, captivating enthusiasm and powerful unity of style.<sup>16</sup>

Bodmer was probably introduced to *Paradise Lost* by his friend, Dr Laurenz Zellweger of Trogen (canton of Appenzell), who had studied in Lyon, Paris and Leyden and kept a comprehensive library. Not long previously, the young Bodmer had obtained his first taste of English literary thought from French translations of *The Spectator* purchased in Geneva. This had inspired him, in winter 1720, aged 22, to start teaching himself English using solely a grammar book entitled *Ludewigs Grammatik*. By May 1723 he had mastered the language sufficiently to request Zellweger to send his copy of Milton to Zurich. In autumn 1723 the young man left Zurich for his parent's vicarage at Greifensee,

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<sup>15</sup> Breitinger, *Critische Dichtkunst*, volume I, p. 58, quoted from Bender, "Nachwort" to *Johann Miltons episches Gedichte von dem verlorren Paradiese. Faksimiledruck der bodmerschen Übersetzung von 1742*, p. 17\* (my translation)

<sup>16</sup> quoted from Hans and Hermann Bodmer, "J.J. Bodmer, sein Leben und seine Werke", p. 11



where he began, first by way of amusement, but then in earnest, to translate *Paradise Lost* into German. He was soon so totally absorbed in the task that his correspondence dried up almost completely and he started to identify with his author to the point of imagining going blind, as had Milton. His only regular correspondent at this time was Breitinger, who performed the task of reading through the translations. By January 1724 the work was close to completion.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Bodmer's translation, entitled *Johann Miltons Verlust des Paradieses*, was not actually published until eight years later. Neither in Germany nor in Switzerland could a publisher be found who was willing to take on the work. In Zurich the religious censor took exception to the unaccustomed use of language for a religious theme, and refused to allow publication:

There is a Mr Bodmer here ... who has translated the notorious Milton's *Carmen Heroicum de paradiso perduto*, described in English, into German prose. It was to have been printed here but the religious censors regard it as too Romantic a text for such a religious topic. It is something exceedingly sublime and emotional but not suitable that permission be given for it to be printed.<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, in 1732, the work was published simultaneously in Zurich by Markus Rordorf, and in Frankfurt and Leipzig. It was not the first German translation of Milton's famous work: In 1682 Ernst Gottlieb von Berg had published a translation in verse form, Theodor Haak (1605 - 1690) had translated books I to III, also in verse, and Christoph Wegleiter (1659 - 1706) had translated lines 1 - 195 of the first book in rhymed alexandrine verse. However it was the first to become widely known in the German-speaking world.

Bodmer was later to refer to this, his first translation of *Paradise Lost*, as his "Swiss" translation, while his next version was given the epithet "German" and his third translation of 1754 that of "poetic". Dissatisfied with his own achievement, he soon started reworking the first translation. Anxious to widen the appeal of his work and to attract a larger German-speaking audience, he also incorporated alterations based on extensive recommendations made by a Leipzig linguistic expert, Johann Christoph Clauder. These were aimed at eliminating Swiss elements that would not be understood by a wider audience, and adapting the text to the more generally-accepted "Meissen" variant of German.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This account of the background to Bodmer's first translation of *Paradise Lost* is largely taken from Hans Bodmer, *Die Anfänge des zürcherischen Milton*.

<sup>18</sup> "Es ist hier ein Herr Bodmer, .... welcher des verrühmten Miltons *Carmen Heroicum de paradiso perduto* in Englisch beschrieben in das Deutsche in ungebundener Rede übersetzt, es hat sollen hier gedruckt werden, die geistlichen Censores aber sehen es für eine allzu romantische Schrift an in einem so heiligen Themate. Es ist etwas Extra-Hohes und Pathetisches, aber nicht recht, dass man es nicht gestattet hat in Druk zu geben", quoted from Thomas Vetter, "J.J. Bodmer und die Englische Litteratur", p. 349, whose source is given as a letter from Moritz Füssli to Huber in St. Gallen dated Zurich, 25 January 1725 (my translation).

<sup>19</sup> See Bender, "Johann Jacob Bodmer und Johann Miltons "Verlohrnes Paradies", pages 241- 245, on Clauder's contribution to the 1742 version.



He also added extensive footnotes, some of them nearly a page long, which included comprehensive discussion of criticisms of Milton made by Voltaire and Constantin Magny. In addition to being longer, the new 1742 "German" version also bore a new title, *Johann Miltons episches Gedichte von dem Verlohrnen Paradiese. Uebersetzt und durchgehends mit Anmerkungen über die Kunst des Poeten begleitet von Johann Jacob Bodmer*.

Still not satisfied with his translation, even after publication of a second version, Bodmer again set to work on improving his text, removing clumsy phrases and subordinate clauses, and rendering the flow of the prose smoother and tighter.<sup>20</sup> This reworked version, the "poetic" version, was published in 1754 under the title *Das verlohrene Paradies*, together with an extensive introduction discussing the history of Milton's work. Another edition appeared five years later with very few changes, a further edition with considerable text alterations in all twelve books in 1769, and a final version with a few spelling alterations in 1780.

Bodmer's tireless efforts to improve his translation were crowned with success. The first edition had met with little echo beyond Switzerland. As Bodmer wrote, "Die erste Übersetzung ist grösstentheils in der Schweiz geblieben, wo sie von den Graubündnern, den Appenzellern, und andern geistreichen Eidgenossen mit Empfindlichkeit gelesen worden" (The first translation remained largely within Switzerland where it was read with feeling by the people of the Grisons, of Appenzell and by other clever Swiss).<sup>21</sup>

With his later versions, however, *Paradise Lost* became widely known and read in Germany. The impact of Milton's work on German writers of the mid to later eighteenth century, in particular Klopstock — and the vital role which Bodmer's translation played in this development — cannot be underestimated. In August 1748 Klopstock admitted to Bodmer

And when Milton, who, without your translation, I might have seen too late, fell into my hands, the fire that Homer had ignited in me leapt high in flames and raised my soul to sing of Heaven and religion.<sup>22</sup>

The inspiration that Klopstock was referring to here was reflected in his *Messias*. Bodmer himself wrote, in the short preface to his 1769 edition:

Das verlohrene Paradies hat in Deutschland so fühlende Leser gefunden als in irgend einem Königreiche [...]

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<sup>20</sup> see Bender, "Nachwort" to *Johann Miltons episches Gedichte von dem verlohrenen Paradiese. Faksimiledruck der bodmerschen Übersetzung von 1742*, p. 12\*

<sup>21</sup> *Sammlung der Zürcherischen Streitschriften zur Verbesserung des deutschen Geschmacks...*, vol. 2, Stück VI, p. 56, quoted from Bender, "Nachwort", p. 10\* (my translation)

<sup>22</sup> "Und als Milton, den ich vielleicht, ohne Ihre Übersetzung, allzuspät zu sehen bekommen hätte, mir in die Hände fiel, loderte das Feuer, das Homer in mir entzündet hatte, zur Flamme auf, und hob meine Seele, um die Himmel und die Religion zu singen," Klopstock's *Sämtliche Werke*, volume 10, 1855, p. 361, quoted from Bender, "Nachwort", p. 19\* (my translation)

(*Das verlorne Paradies* has attracted as ardent a readership in Germany as in any kingdom [...])<sup>23</sup>

Yet in his study of the development of German literature in Zurich in the mid eighteenth century, Herbert Schöffler describes the effect of the work carried out by the "hard-working prose translator" as "totally inadequate, and in our opinion, grotesque" when compared with the original.<sup>24</sup> Bodmer himself expressed his concern, which only increased as he continued with his translation of Milton, that he would be unable to match Milton's urgent, brief and sublime manner of writing.<sup>25</sup> In an analysis of Bodmer's first "Swiss" translation of *Paradise Lost*, Bender draws attention to Milton's particular style which maintains tension over several lines, moving onwards towards a very specific target. In his endeavour to reproduce these complex sentences, Bodmer was obliged to unravel the structure, transforming compactness into a scarcely comprehensible or manageable — and much longer — sequence of clauses.<sup>26</sup>

The following example of Bodmer's first *Paradise Lost* translation of 1732, taken from the beginning of Book IX, is the same as that given by Bender in the "Nachwort" to his facsimile edition of the Bodmer translation. Here it is preceded by the English original (in the 1997 edition edited by Alastair Fowler) and followed by a recent German translation (by Hans Heinrich Meier, first published in 1968 by Reclam):

No more of talk where God or angel guest  
With man, as with his friend, familiar used  
To sit indulgent, and with him partake  
Rural repast, permitting him the while  
Venial discourse unblamed: I now must change  
Those notes to tragic; [...]

Keine vertrauliche Gespräche mehr, dergleichen Gott oder ein Englischer Gast  
öffters mit dem Menschen führten, da sie gewohnt waren, bey ihm als bey  
einem Freunde zu sitzen, und an seinem Tische mit einer Feld-mahlzeit verlieb zu  
nehmen, auch ihm auf sein Bitten vergünstigten mittlerweile erlaubte Fragen und  
Antworten auf die Bahne zu bringen. Ich muss nun diese Noten in Tragische  
verändern [...]

Nichts mehr davon, dass Engel oder Gott  
Sich mit dem Menschen als mit ihrem Freund  
Vertraulich niederliessen und mit ihm

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<sup>23</sup> quoted from Bender, "Nachwort", p. 14\* (my translation) from Klopstock's *Sämtliche Werke*, volume 10, 1855, p. 361

<sup>24</sup> quoted from Wolfgang Bender, "Johann Jacob Bodmer und Johann Miltons 'Verlorne Paradies'", p. 248

<sup>25</sup> "Meine Furcht ist in wäherender Arbeit der Übersezung beständig grösser gewesen, dass ich Miltons nachdrückliche, kurze und erhabene Schreibart nicht erreichen mögte," quoted from Bender, "Nachwort", p. 6\* (my translation).

<sup>26</sup> Bender, "Nachwort", p. 9\* - 10\*

Ein ländlich Mahl genossen, während er  
Sich des Gespräches frei erkühnen durfte.  
Gezwungen wendet sich fortan mein Ton  
Ins Tragische — [...]

It would appear that Breitinger and Bodmer's translation principle of faithfulness to the original, whereby a translator should never "allow himself the freedom of deviating from the basic text" had produced a Milton translation whose impact was far from that of the original English text. The first "Swiss" translation, which stuck most closely to the original, was soon regarded, even by Bodmer himself, as clumsy and in need of improvement. By reworking this first translation he hoped to make Milton attractive to a wider audience. In the process his translation become freer. Thus we see a shift from his first, more source-text-oriented approach to a greater target text orientation in his second "German" translation, in the interests of getting his literary message across. As Bender puts it

We would certainly not be wrong in stating that what Bodmer was ultimately concerned about was not Milton as such but rather the explanation of important aesthetic questions [...]. In this respect it naturally appeared advisable to present the rendering in an exemplary linguistic form, comprehensible to all Germans. Ultimately, Milton's standing and the ready acceptance of his form of presentation would depend on recognition of this.<sup>27</sup>

In other respects, however, Bodmer's Milton translation closely adhered to the requirements set down in Breitinger's translation essay, particularly in his comprehensive defence and explanation of the work he had set out to present to a German-speaking public.

### **Samuel Butler's quixotic *Hudibras***

Even before his first Milton translation was published, Bodmer had turned his attention to a second, very different English work. In 1724, soon after completing his Milton translation, he received a copy of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* from his Trogen friend, Laurenz Zellweger. Butler's work is a satire, published in 1663, soon after the English Restoration, and written in rhyming couplets. It relates to the period of the Commonwealth under Cromwell. As described in an anthology covering the period, it sums up an era of fanaticism in the Quixotic career of its Presbyterian knight and his independent or radical Protestant squire.<sup>28</sup> Immensely successful in England at the time, Jonathan Swift was reported to have known much of it by heart.

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<sup>27</sup> "Man geht gewiss nicht fehl in der Feststellung, dass es Bodmer schliesslich nicht um Milton als solchen ging, sondern eher um die Erörterung wichtiger ästhetischer Probleme, für die dann freilich Milton das Exempel bildete. Insofern schien es natürlich auch geraten, der Übertragung eine mustergültige, allen Deutschen verständliche sprachliche Form zu geben. Von der Anerkennung derselben hing nicht zuletzt das Ansehen Miltons und die bereitwillige Aufnahme seiner Darstellungsweise ab," Bender, "Johann Jacob Bodmer und Johann Miltons 'Verlohrnes Paradies'", p. 249 (my translation)

<sup>28</sup> Martin Price, *The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, New York/ London/ Toronto 1973, p.15

Bodmer may have been attracted to this satiric work by the narrow-minded reception which greeted his Milton translation. Certainly, by 1729 he was already quoting and translating passages from *Hudibras*. The translation was published in 1737, but only comprised the first and second canto. In a preface, Bodmer outlines the author's life, draws attention to the subtle wit of the work, and describes its chief intention as political, in other words,

[...] die Feuerbläser in der Kirche und dem Staat durchzuhecheln, welche unter dem Vorwand der Religion den König Carl ermordet, ein eigenmächtiges Regiment eingeführet, und Gleissnerey, Heucheley, und Schwermerey auf den Thron gesetzt; Buttler hat diese Absicht mit einem so ausserordentlichen Reichtum von feinem Witz und netten Verstand ausgeführet [...]

([...] to pull to pieces those who fanned the flames in the church and the state and murdered King Charles on the pretext of religion, who introduced an unauthorised regime, setting double-dealing, hypocrisy and fanaticism on the throne; Butler has fulfilled this aim with such outstandingly subtle wit and fine intellect [...])<sup>29</sup>

He then embarks on an extensive discussion of whether the translation should retain the rhyming couplets of the original — which is interesting in view of the fact that in *Paradise Lost* he had decided against retaining the original verse form, rendering his German version in prose. This decision had been in line with a number of theoretical arguments by both Bodmer and Breitinger pointing out the detrimental effects on a translation of being forced into a poetical straitjacket. In *Hudibras*, again, Bodmer decided in favour of a prose rendition. In the preface he points out that, so far, no translation had been made, and that one of the reasons given for this had been the impossibility of rendering the rhyming couplets in German. He argues in favour of a prose rendering, stating that a faithful translation in this form would present the actual content of Butler's work without all the distractions to the reader imposed by the verse form. Here we see a sample of the English original text followed by Bodmer's translation, enabling us to see how this looked in practice:

But when he pleased to show it, his speech  
In loftiness of sound was rich,  
A Babylonish dialect  
Which learnèd pedants much affect.  
It was a parti-coloured dress  
Of patched and piebald languages;  
'Twas English cut on Greek and Latin,  
Like fustian heretofore on satin.

Aber wenn es ihm beliebte, so war seine Rede reich an Hoheit des Thones; es war eine Babylonische Mund-Art, in welcher es gelehrte Pedanten aufs höchste bringen; ein bunt-gefärbte Rock, von zerrissenen und zersetzten Sprachen

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<sup>29</sup> *Versuch einer Deutschen Übersetzung von Samuel Butlers Hudibras, einem satyrischen Gedichte wider die Schwärmer und Independenten, zur Zeit Carls des Ersten, 1737, p. 4 (my translation)*

zusammen geflicket; es war Englisch auf das Lateinische und Griechische genehet, wie wann man Nördlinger-Tuch auf Satin setzt.<sup>30</sup>

Bodmer's work was overtaken, thirty years later, by a translation of the entire work completed by another Swiss, Johann Heinrich Waser, and received little attention. However, in a review of Bodmer and his activities in the fields of literary criticism and translation of English literature, Thomas Vetter praises the quality of the work, finding only insignificant oversights and no mistakes. The clumsy German, he believes, is a fair reflection of the frequently intentional clumsiness of the English original.<sup>31</sup>

### The Dunciad and other translations

Ten years elapsed before Bodmer was to publish another English work in translation. In the meantime both Breitinger's and Bodmer's essays on translation were published, as well as the second, "German", translation of *Paradise Lost*. Then, in 1747, his translation of Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* appeared. Pope's poem had first been published in three books in 1728. Twelve years later Pope wrote a fourth book, simultaneously revising the first three poems. Dedicated to ridiculing false learning, Pope's work tells of the dunces who promote the debasement of English culture. The poem describes them moving westward, leaving the low scenes of Smithfield Fair to take over King George II's court. This is an ironic counterpart to Aeneas' bearing the culture of fallen Troy westward to found a new empire, and the aim of the work is to demonstrate the subversion of high by low. The archetypal dunce is the English poet laureate, Colley Cibber, and the epic games involve authors, publishers and patrons.<sup>32</sup>

Bodmer translated only the first three books, basing his translation on the first version. Tellingly, the preface to his translation was dedicated to the "Obrtiten", the inhabitants of Saxony in Germany, in other words, Gottsched and his followers. Its publication occurred in the midst of the literary dispute with the Leipzig group centred on Gottsched, and it is generally commented that Bodmer's motivation in publishing this translation was to disparage Gottsched's circle. Indeed, his first words in the preface read, "Alexander Pope was ein geschworener Feind der Dummheit" (Alexander Pope was a sworn enemy of stupidity),<sup>33</sup> and he later states that "die Dummheit über das denkende und gründliche Ding in den Obotritischen Köpfen bisher noch so gewaltig geherrscht hat, dass wir eben nicht allzuweit hinter den Engelländern zurück bleiben" (to date, stupidity relating to matters of thought and fundamental matters has reigned so powerfully in the heads of the Obrtiten that we are not so very far behind the English).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> lines 91 - 98, canto I. English original quoted from Price, p. 18; Bodmer's text taken from the 1737 translation, p. 4 - 5

<sup>31</sup> Vetter, "J.J. Bodmer und die Englische Litteratur", p. 354

<sup>32</sup> Description taken from Martin Price, op. cit., p. 393 - 94

<sup>33</sup> *Alexander Popen's Duncias, mit historischen Noten und einem Schreiben des Uebersetzers an die Obotriten*, Zurich 1747, Preface p. 3

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p. 5 - 6

He then goes on to explain that he had originally intended to provide the translation with explanatory notes. In these he would have matched each English name cited in Pope's poem to the name of an appropriate German. However, he had found that several names would have fitted in many of these places, and also that it was difficult to come up with the names of sufficiently venial publishers in Germany. This absence of explanatory notes contravened Breitinger's requirement that a responsible translator provide information on the works he translates. It would also appear to have been short-sighted in terms of reception of the work, since it has been commented that even the English version could have done with explanatory notes, let alone its German translation. It is certain, writes Vetter, that his [Bodmer's] contemporaries were unable to understand a series of allusions, particularly in the second book, that we nowadays find difficult to work through, even with the aid of a comprehensive collection of reference books.<sup>35</sup>

Another new departure for Bodmer was the use of blank verse rather than prose for this translation. This is handled securely, even if relatively monotonously, comments Vetter. Bodmer himself makes no comment at all on the form of his translation.

*The Dunciad* was the last new work of translation to be published by Bodmer until very late in his life, when, as an old man, his Homer and Percy translations appeared. On translating Homer he wrote, "Ich denke immer, die grösste Schwierigkeit komme dem Übersetzer von Homers unnachahmlicher Einfalt." (I always think that the greatest difficulty for translators arises out of Homer's inimitable simplicity).<sup>36</sup> Bodmer's complete works of Homer were published (in two volumes) in 1778, when Bodmer turned 80, but he had actually begun his intensive work on the classical author in the early fifties. As in *The Dunciad*, he translated the verse form of the Greek original into German verse, preserving the Homeric hexameter form.

The response to this work has been varied, and its impact was not great in the longer term. Bodmer's translation was one of many attempts at Homer's classic work, and was clearly overshadowed by Johann Heinrich Voss's Homer translation of 1793. Bodmer has been called the most outstanding Homer translator of the era before Winckelmann and Herder.<sup>37</sup> In 1778 Christoph Martin Wieland wrote, "The great merit of the German writer is that he seldom falsely attributes any subsidiary idea to the original text".<sup>38</sup> This is an indication perhaps that not only did Bodmer largely adhere to his and Breitinger's principle of faithfulness in translation, but that by now this translation approach was appreciated by a wider audience in Germany. However other commentators have referred to alarming abridgements, unfavourable helplessness and irregularity.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "[...] "es ist sicher, dass seine Zeitgenossen eine Reihe von Anspielungen zumal im zweiten Buche nicht verstehen konnten, in die wir uns heute selbst mit Hilfe eines umfangreiches Apparates nur schwer hineinarbeiten", Vetter, "J.J. Bodmer und die englische Litteratur", p. 356

<sup>36</sup> "Schwierigkeiten, den Homer zu verdeutschen", quoted in Ernst, op. cit. p.54 (my translation)

<sup>37</sup> "der hervorragendste Homerübersetzer aus der Epoche vor Winckelmann und Herder" (E. Schmidt), quoted from Bender, *J.J. Bodmer und J.J. Breitinger*, p. 48

<sup>38</sup> "Das grosse Verdienst des teutschen Dichters ist, dass er seinem Original selten einen Nebenbegriff unterschiebt," quoted from Bender, *J.J. Bodmer und J.J. Breitinger*, p. 48 (my translation).

<sup>39</sup> see Bender, *ibid*, p. 47 and Adalbert Schroeter, *Geschichte der deutschen Homer-Übersetzung im 18. Jahrhundert*, Hildesheim 1978, p. 60.



In 1781 and 1782 Bodmer published his translations of selected ballads taken from Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (published in 1765 in three volumes). His preface indicates that his interest in these ballads was prompted, at least to some extent, by his intense interest and involvement in Middle High German poetry and love poetry, but does not enter into any discussion of the translation approach employed. In the first volume Bodmer presented 25 ballads, and in the second 13. They included the ballads of Patrick Spense, King Lear and Robin Hood, and were translated in rhyming verse.

### Lives of achievement

Taken as a whole, Bodmer's translations, together with Breitinger's translation theory, had an important impact on both translation into German and original writing in German during the eighteenth century. The *Paradise Lost* translations, in particular, not only furthered knowledge of John Milton, but also provided the focal point of a key literary dispute between the Zurich school centred on Bodmer and Breitinger and the Leipzig school centred on Gottsched, a dispute which was eventually settled in favour of the Zurich school, and which was followed by significant changes in writing style in Germany.

In 1797 Johann Gottfried Herder commented

Even the English themselves scarcely gave their most excellent writers such a genuine, warm and animated welcome as we did to Shakespeare, Milton, Addison, Swift, Thomson, Sterne, Hume, Robertson, Gibbon.<sup>40</sup>

He was describing a development that had begun in the early eighteenth century. Bodmer's role in translating Milton had been particularly important in this development. In particular, contact with Milton had brought a totally new approach to creative expression — the enthusiastic momentum, the expression of emotions in a sublime tone which contributed towards poetical expression from Klopstock onwards.

Bodmer and Breitinger's new approach to translation also played a considerable part in rethinking translation in the eighteenth century, a development which is all the more important in view of the very significant role of translated literature in this period.

Reviewing these not inconsiderable achievements, along with Bodmer and Breitinger's work in the field of Middle High German studies, Goethe's later comments on the

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<sup>40</sup> "Von den Engländern selbst [sind] ihre trefflichsten Schriftsteller kaum mit so reger treuer Wärme aufgenommen worden, als von uns Shakespeare, Milton, Addison, Swift, Thomson, Sterne, Hume, Robertson, Gibbon, aufgenommen sind," quoted from Bender, "Nachwort" to *Johann Miltons episches Gedichte von dem verlohrnen Paradiese. Faksimiledruck der bodmerschen Übersetzung von 1742*, p. 3\*, to whom I also owe the general comments following this quote. (my translation of Herder)

"cheerful old man of medium stature"<sup>41</sup> he had visited in Zurich in 1779, and on his companion Breitinger, would thus appear unnecessarily dismissive:

Bodmer, with all the pains he took, remained theoretically and practically a child all his life. Breitinger was an able, learned, sagacious man, whom, when he looked rightly about him [...] may have dimly felt the deficiencies of his system.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "ein munterer Greis von mittlerer Statur, quoted from Ernst, p. 121

<sup>42</sup> quoted from Goethe's autobiography, in the translation by John Oxenford published as *The Early Life of Goethe*, ed. W. von Knoblauch, p. 234 - 35

**Breitinger and Bodmer:  
translations and publications on translation**

- 1732 *Johann Miltons Verlust des Paradieses. Ein Heldengedicht. In ungebundener Rede übersetzt*, 1732. Translated by J.J. Bodmer. Further editions in 1742, 1754, 1759, 1769, 1780
- 1740 "Von der Kunst der Uebersetzung," in *Critische Dichtkunst*, by J.J. Breitinger
- 1746 "Von der erforderten Genauigkeit beym Uebersetzen," in *Der Mahler Der Sitten*, volume 2, by J.J. Bodmer
- 1737 *Versuch einer Deutschen Übersetzung von Samuel Butlers Hudibras, Einem Satyrischen Gedichte wider die Schwärmer und Independenten, zur Zeit Carls des Ersten*. Translated by J.J. Bodmer
- 1747 *Alexander Popens Duncias mit Historischen Noten und einem Schreiben des Uebersetzers an die Obrigkeit*". Translated by J.J. Bodmer
- 1778 *Homers Werke. Aus dem Griechischen übersetzt von dem Dichter der Noachide*, 2 volumes. Translated by J.J. Bodmer
- 1780 *Jakob beym Brunnen. Ein Schäferspiel des Lemene*. Translation of Francesco Lemene's *Giacobbe al fonte, Dialogo per musica, 1700*, by J.J. Bodmer
- 1780 *Altenglische Balladen. Fabel von Laudine. Siegeslied der Franken*. Selected ballads from Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, translated by J.J. Bodmer
- 1781 *Altenglische und altschwäbische Balladen in Eschilbachs Versart, Zugabe von Fragmenten aus dem altschwäbischen Zeitalter, und Gedichten. Zweytes Bändchen*. Selected ballads from Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, translated by J.J. Bodmer, with Middle High German poetry

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